

**Weil, Truth and Life:
Simone Weil and ancient pedagogy as a way of life**

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Abstract

Contemporary philosophers, wary of the vaulted metaphysical systems proposed by Enlightenment thinkers, have explored alternative avenues of doing philosophy. Unfortunately, these “new” philosophical systems often neglect their roots in ancient philosophical practice. The purpose of this thesis is to textually ascertain the ancient concept of philosophy as a way of life in the contemporary philosophical work of Simone Weil. This connection is demonstrated in two distinct yet related ways. The practical pedagogy demonstrated through biographical work and student lecture notes provide a distinct vision of her life’s bent toward practical philosophy. In addition, her Notebooks, read in light of Pierre Hadot’s interpretation of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, demonstrate the pervasiveness of this way of life in her personal textual engagement. In Weil, therefore, we find an important contemporary instance of continuing and reinterpreting the ancient philosophical practice where she finds her philosophical origin.

Abbreviations¹

FLN	<i>First and Last Notebooks</i>
Contradiction	“Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil” (Springsted)
GG	<i>Gravity and Grace</i>
IC	<i>The Inner Citadel</i> (Hadot)
Intimations	<i>Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks</i>
IPC	<i>Intuitions Pré-chrétiennes</i>
LN	<i>London Notebook</i>
LP	<i>Lectures on Philosophy</i>
N1	<i>Notebooks, vol. 1</i>
N2	<i>Notebooks, vol. 2</i>
NR	<i>Need for Roots</i>
NYN	<i>New York Notebook</i>
PWN	<i>Prewar Notebook</i>
PWL	<i>Philosophy as a Way of Life</i> (Hadot)
SG	<i>La Source Grecque</i>
WG	<i>Waiting for God</i>

¹ Sources are authored by Simone Weil, unless otherwise noted.

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Introduction

Biographical accounts of Simone Weil's life invariably note her many academic and professional achievements, her strength of character and her tireless efforts for those who were oppressed. These accounts also invariably dwell on the peculiarities surrounding her early death in such a striking way as to make it the culmination of her life. While Weil's contradictory contemplations about life and death, especially in her final years, may suggest that this was also her understanding of her life, her earlier writings emphasize the importance she placed on the act of living. It was this emphasis that she admired so vocally in ancient philosophy, and what she hoped to live up to in her own life. The focus on the puzzling circumstances of her death (what was the cause of death? Could she have prevented it by following her doctor's orders? Was it suicide?) symbolically put to death her ideas as practice, the context which gave them life. Marcus Aurelius, aware of the fleeting nature of his life, downplayed what he wrote when thinking about his legacy. He was more concerned that his writing would positively influence his subsequent living. So too with Weil. Our focus on her death can lead us to her ideas, which, cut off from her life practice, are also dead.

Instead of wrestling with the riddle of her death, this thesis will treat the fruitful interaction between Weil's thought (as in her varied writings) and her practice. In this emphasis we will follow her own admiration of ancient philosophy which was predicated on the congruency between a philosopher's written thoughts and his/her life practice—that is, evidence for a deep love for truth that permeates all of life.

This love of truth, which Weil desperately hoped she could live up to, is marked by tireless effort and incessant pedagogical growth. It is what Weil found in ancient

philosophy through the dialogues of Plato and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, and it is a practice that she tried to emulate through her own life's work. This thesis will show the continuity between Weil's writing, in particular, its pedagogy, and the pedagogical therapies of thinkers like Marcus whom she admired greatly. Weil's self and corporate pedagogy not only consists of ancient philosophical principles, but it also exemplifies the very impetus of philosophy in the ancient world, that is: philosophy as a discipline of right living. This is demonstrated by her thematic and practical similarity to Marcus Aurelius and his *Meditations* as both Weil and Marcus engage in specifically contextual and writing-centered philosophy for each of their own particular needs.

In contemporary scholarship:

A significant amount of contemporary scholarship has treated various facets of Weil's relationship or intellectual debt to Plato. Following her outspoken praise of Plato (especially over and against her hatred toward Aristotle), this seems an apt and helpful scholarly emphasis. However, Weil's attraction to Platonic philosophy as she learned and experienced it was not specifically an attraction to Plato, but rather to an ancient philosophical desire which led to a particular way of living in/with the world. In as much as Plato exemplifies this life through his texts, this focus on Weilian Platonism is truly apt.

Weil's love of philosophy as a way of life should give us pause when choosing exemplars for fruitful comparison, however. For Weil's ancient reading extends far beyond the limits of Plato. By following this tradition and Weil's engagement of it, we can find fruitful comparison between Weil and other thinkers in dimensions other than those explicit in Plato. One such thinker is Marcus Aurelius, and the particular discipline he exemplifies most helpfully is a self-oriented philosophical pedagogy.

Because it is a common theme in Weil's work, her philosophy of education (especially as it touches her pupils and her proposals for changes in the social structure) has been well-treated. However, these studies look exclusively at Weil's suggestions or practice as outwardly focused—for society or her students. Indeed, her texts² do have these intentions for application. It is, however, in her personal writing, found in her *Notebooks*, that we find evidence of her engagement in the personal philosophic pedagogy similar to our ancient exemplar Marcus Aurelius.

In this way, this thesis contributes to contemporary scholarship a critical examination of Weil's work vis á vis an ancient philosopher other than Plato, that is, Marcus Aurelius, in order to ascertain her appropriation of the project of ancient philosophy as a whole, namely, the realization of a schooled art of right living. In addition, we will examine her discipline of personally focused pedagogical philosophy as it compares to the similarly focused ancient tradition. Some Weilian interpreters caution against a disciplinary treatment of Weil, for fear that the interdisciplinary orientation of her texts may get lost in the focus on a particular discipline.³ This fear is alive in the field of education just as it is in that of philosophy or religion. This thesis, however, is not focused on education per se, or any other particular discipline. Rather, it uses disciplines as it needs to examine the self-directed pedagogy and life practice that Weil performs as it mirrors ancient practice. Our examination of Weil's practice will indeed be multi-

² Especially the essay in *Waiting for God* (trans. Emma Craufurd [New York: GP Putnum and Sons, 1951]) entitled "Reflections on the Right use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" (105-116) and the lecture notes of one of her students, Anne Reynaud-Guérithault entitled *Lectures on Philosophy* trans. Hugh Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³ Christopher Frost and Rebecca Bell-Metereau. *Simone Weil: On Politics Religion and Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 4-7.

disciplinary and contextually focused—seeing how Weil picks up philosophical and religious themes in her personally pedagogic/therapeutic writing.

Outline of Chapters

The thesis begins with a biographical exploration of Weil's pedagogical roots in chapter one. Because Weil's life is so important to her philosophy, our investigation of it here at the beginning is central for framing the following chapters. Our biographical investigation is divided into two parts: her initial pedagogical formation in relation to the person of Alain, and her pedagogical transmission as she became a teacher herself. We will see Alain's influence on Weil both in subject matter and in method of interaction, but also Weil's departure from some of his fundamental principles as she began to teach. The texts Weil interacted with at this formative time of her philosophical development will be important throughout the rest of the thesis, and it is imperative that we situate them in proper context from the beginning.

Chapter two provides further situation of concepts and practices important to Weil's later pedagogy by examining the ancient practice of philosophy as a way of life as seen through Pierre Hadot's treatment of Marcus Aurelius. This chapter explicates various disciplines important for ancient philosophy, especially in the ability of the disciplines to disclose the ancient emphasis on the practice of right living. Here we will primarily use Hadot's textual explication to determine the significance of Marcus' personal writings found in his *Meditations*. The themes found here, contextual application of generic principles, attention/practice and memory, will figure strongly in later chapters on Weil's *Notebooks*, which are of a similar genre. This chapter will thus provide the background for understanding the overall project of ancient philosophy as

Weil appreciated it and appropriated it in her own pedagogical and philosophical practice.

Chapter three focuses on Weil's pedagogy in relation to her theoretical work. In fruitful dialogue with the pedagogic *practice* that we found in the first chapter, this chapter examines Weil's philosophy of education as is illuminated in *texts* such as *Lectures on Philosophy* and *Waiting for God*. *Lectures on Philosophy*, as a direct engagement with Weil's work (by means of one of her students), bridges her thought and practice well, though ironically we will find exploration of the contradiction of thought and action to recur in Weil's writing. After examining her philosophy of education, paying attention to *who* (is educated) and *how* (to educate), we will then explore some of Weil's best-loved pedagogical tools. Though these methods of contradiction, analogy and myth figure prominently in *Lectures on Philosophy*, they are by no means limited to her specifically pedagogical texts and in fact occur throughout her oeuvre.

The exploration of pedagogic tools in use throughout Weil's work in chapter three prompts our investigation in chapter four of the pedagogic viability of Weil's most personal texts: her *Notebooks*. As we find evidence in Weil's *First and Last Notebooks* (as paradigmatic for the *Notebooks* that came in between) for personal pedagogy akin to that of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, we will discover the depth of Weil's appropriation of ancient philosophy—in practice. As in the previous chapters, we will again focus on the significance of Weil's contextual application of principles, her use of repetition for mnemonic purposes, evidence of her practice of attention, and the importance of writing. Each notebook in *First and Last Notebooks* shows Weil's contextual understanding of her immediate surroundings and situations, progressively demonstrating her more nuanced

understanding of themes throughout her work, especially that of contradiction. Weil's reflections in her final, *London Notebook* are especially poignant as we as readers recognize her awareness of her immanent death and her repetition of therapeutically-significant themes, not appreciably different from Marcus' therapeutically-focused writings facing similarly dire living situations.

Chapter 1: Simone Weil's Education—Learning from Alain

Introduction:

It seems that one can hardly speak of Simone Weil's philosophical work without first beginning with some biographical background.⁴ This is due in large part to the fantastic and unusual brilliance of her short life on earth. It is also due to the fundamental connection between her thought and its working out in her everyday experience. It is this latter engagement with Weil's thought that will concern us most here. This thesis is concerned with pedagogical practice as it is made evident in her philosophical work. Consequently, it gives significant attention to her pedagogical roots. Since Weil's later writings demonstrate most clearly her pedagogical philosophy as a therapy of the soul, it is important that her early schooling and teaching provide significant continuities with her pedagogical practice.

As Weil's biographers demonstrate, much can be said concerning Simone Weil's short life. Because of the specific focus of this thesis, however, the present biographical introduction will touch only on those parts relevant that disclose Weil's specifically pedagogical connections in early life. I will treat Weil's philosophical training and her teaching in the following two sections. An initial section on Weil's philosophical education centers on the figure of her teacher, Emile Chartier⁵ and the dynamics of his

⁴ For example, the introductions to Weil's English volumes by Leslie Fiedler, TS Eliot and Gustave Thibon in *Waiting for God*, *Need for Roots* and *Gravity and Grace* (respectively) all spend a significant amount of time on Weil's life and her early pedagogical influences. Indeed, editors have included her biography, in varying lengths, at the beginning of nearly all her works in English translation; it is not confined merely to stated biographical volumes—Petrement's *La Vie de Simone Weil*, Cabaud's *Fellowship of Love*, and Fiori's *Simone Weil*.

⁵ Hereafter, he will be referred to by his more-widely known name, Alain.

pedagogical relationship with her, both as to subject matter and pedagogical emphasis.⁶

A second section focuses on Weil's own exercise of pedagogical practice in her philosophy classroom—how it relates to and departs from Alain's, and how it foreshadows her later philosophy as a therapy of the soul.

Education with Alain:

Person of Alain

Simone Weil's formal philosophical training began after the First World War at the lycées Fenelon and Victor Duruy. However, it was not until the next year, when she began at the lycée Henri IV that her most formative training began. The significance of this time for Weil's philosophical development was due in a large part to the pedagogic presence of Alain.⁷ Alain prepared students to take the entrance exam for the École Normale Supérieure by emphasizing major philosophical thinkers from ancient Greece through the modern philosophical tradition, and the importance of writing. The successes of many of Alain's students in their continued education and future academic careers suggest the value of this pedagogy.⁸ Simone Pétrement, a friend of Weil's and fellow student of Alain's, writes about the efficacy of his historical and writing-centered emphasis. She says, "the greatness of his teaching can be found in what is positive in it: a profound analysis of perception, admirable lessons in reading the great philosophers (and

⁶ As we will see, Alain was significant to Weil both in his engagement with the ancient Greek tradition, provoking Weil's continued interest in Greco-Roman texts, but also in his Socratic teaching practices as a model for Weil's own pedagogy.

⁷ David Anderson, *Simone Weil* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 20.

⁸ In addition to Weil, Alain's students included André Maurois, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, René Château and Jacques Ganuchaud (Pétrement, 45 and Anderson, 21).

in general the great writers), and a method for learning how to think by means of a severe act of attention brought to bear on the art of writing.”⁹

Pétrement, in her biography of Weil, finds it necessary to distill Alain’s teaching into a point by point “doctrine,” in order for readers to understand his thought, and consequently, Weil’s connection to it. She does this by itemizing themes that recur in Alain’s classroom presentation.¹⁰ In doing so, she creates discontinuity between her pedagogical representation and Alain’s pedagogical intention. Pétrement acknowledges this by stating, “Alain himself looked askance at all such attempts [to summarize his teachings into a system or doctrine]. ...he most likely would have denied that he had a doctrine.”¹¹ Pétrement is justified in this conclusion in view of Alain’s practice not only in the classroom (a particularly situated environment) but also in his very contextual articles—both of which discourage systematizing work.¹²

In an attempt to be fair to Alain’s desire that his work be properly contextual, our examination of him here will focus on his pedagogic practices as worked out through his curriculum and his interaction with students. Alain’s love of ancient Greek thought and his desire to connect it to more contemporary philosophy and literature was evident in his curriculum. During the years that Weil attended lycée Henri IV, Alain discussed Plato and Balzac, Kant’s *Critiques* and Homer’s *Illiad*, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Lucretius’ poem. It was Alain’s practice in his courses to choose one philosopher and

⁹ Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 31.

¹⁰ Pétrement, 31-33.

¹¹ Pétrement, 30.

¹² Pétrement, 30-31.

one poet/essayist/novelist and devote one hour a week to each throughout the year.¹³ His juxtapositions of genres, authors and time periods in service of his pedagogic intention to teach his students to think was significant, and is a feature of his pedagogy that will be important as we later discover Weil's pedagogic practice.

In addition to the importance Alain placed on his student's written engagement with ancient Greek sources, he also practiced Socrates' role as philosophical midwife. According to Fiori, Alain exercised this in two ways, "by retracing the journey of a thought to its origin by way of words and by questioning every philosophical maxim."¹⁴ This is to say Alain emphasized what was to be gained through thinkers in the history of philosophy more than their individual philosophical discrepancies.¹⁵ Alain's classroom practice, contiguous with that of the philosophers he taught, was oriented more toward forming than informing his students.

While his students often compared his general pedagogical engagement and his specific classroom practice to the figure of Socrates, Alain also practiced philosophy in the "classical French tradition—urbane, detached, sceptical and agnostic."¹⁶ Cabaud conveys a similar picture of Alain's attitude toward philosophy by emphasizing his "eclecticism" and saying that (according to Weil's view of philosophy, which will be developed later) he practiced "intellectual philandering."¹⁷ Alain's perceived and actual

¹³ Pétrement, 35. Pétrement admits that her recollection of Alain's choice of texts is fragmentary and incomplete, though it provides a helpful idea of the kinds of texts that he would treat, and may help in ascertaining Alain's probable pedagogic intention—though this will be more clear in what follows.

¹⁴ Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography* trans. Joseph R. Berrigan (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 32.

¹⁵ Cabaud, 26.

¹⁶ Anderson, 22.

¹⁷ Cabaud, 36.

detachment of thought from practice would leave a lasting impression on Weil; it was a pedagogical example she would avoid at all costs.

Philosophical formation that pre-dated her pedagogical encounter with Alain made possible Weil's attitudinal departure from her most influential teacher, pointing to an important difference between their two philosophical practices. The revolutionary ethos that Cabaud notes above, so common among French intellectuals, was at work in Weil before her meeting with Alain and it contributed to her critical stance toward social structures and the 'powers that be.' However, Weil's revolutionary orientation, which developed prior to but partly in conjunction with Alain, also differed importantly from his. This is because Weil showed a propensity for engaged and in fact markedly partisan philosophy. This partisan philosophy—with a fundamental tendency toward societal engagement—was politically directed throughout Weil's intellectual career. Toward the end of her life, it became religiously engaged as well.

Pétrément explains the relationship between Weil's "innate" commitments to engaged philosophy and her engagement to the sceptically founded philosophy of Alain.

Perhaps Simone owes to him the deepening of her feeling of revolt, the discernment of the real causes of tyranny, and the rejection of false solutions.... But in her determination to be always on the side of the slave she joined hands with her teacher rather than having formed this attitude on the basis of his doctrine. This was in her, as in him, an instinctive emotion and character trait that existed prior to any philosophical belief.¹⁸

In other words, Weil and Alain shared a foundational commitment to the cause of the underdog that predated their pedagogical encounter. However, Weil's *exercise* of that fundamental commitment was and continued to be more engaged with social structures than did Alain's. Pétrément implies this by stating that, without Alain, Weil would

¹⁸ Pétrément, 25.

probably have “wasted her devotion in the service of some political party.”¹⁹ Alain’s non-partisan philosophy influenced Weil just enough to keep her devoted to the critical study of philosophy without keeping her from the exercise of her socially-conscious work.

Weil’s indebtedness to Alain

Though Alain held to a greater detachment of thought from action than Weil, his attachment to his students did not cease upon their promotion. Many of Alain’s former students continued to attend classes with their teacher even while continuing their education elsewhere.²⁰ This continuing relationship proved especially helpful for Weil’s development as a writer, since Alain continued to read her work. In fact it was in Alain’s journal, *Libres Propos*, that Weil’s first article was published while she was still a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, in 1929.²¹

Alain provoked strong, albeit contrary, reactions in his students. Many students conscientiously espoused his thought in its entirety while others rejected it, though both groups of students shared the practice of projecting on Alain a fixed doctrine (as in Petrément, above) to be worshipped or condemned. A student in the former group, André Maurois stated at Alain’s funeral, “Socrates is not dead, he lives in Plato. Plato is not dead, he lives in Alain. Alain is not dead, he lives in us.”²² However, instead of taking this idea as living the legacy of their professor, i.e., by applying the gist of his thought as pedagogically lived, Alain’s most devoted students took to the rote practice of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cabaud, 33.

²¹ Cabaud, 33.

²² Anderson, 21.

“copy[ing] him slavishly.”²³ In this appropriation of Alain, there was no creative working with his thought, no attempt to imitate pedagogic practice, but only to state categorically his views as the last word on the subject at hand. Jean-Paul Sartre, as an example of the latter group of students, fundamentally disagreed with Alain’s premises and their attendant ‘doctrine.’ Sartre’s guiding questions about the nature and problem of existence could find no illumination in the “metaphysical assuredness”²⁴ of his teacher, and Alain was therefore of no use to him.

Weil, however, managed an relationship to Alain that was neither “slavish copying” nor complete repudiation. She practiced philosophy using many of the tools that she gained from Alain, yet her style and thought were uniquely her own. Though biographers disagree about what component of this pedagogic relationship was most important to Weil’s philosophical development, there is no doubt that it was highly significant. It is worth noting several ways in which Weil was indebted to Alain. Contrary to the spirit of several of her biographers, I do not want to focus on any kind of doctrinal transfer from Alain to Weil. As mentioned previously, I do not find Pétrement’s insistence on formulating Alain’s doctrine central to Weil’s engagement with his thought. Similarly, Anderson’s assertion that Weil’s most important lesson from Alain was his introduction to Lagneau also misses the richness of their pedagogical relationship.²⁵ Rather, I want to point to two non-doctrinal influences. First, Weil learned from Alain a love of the ancient Greek philosophical tradition.²⁶ Just as the

²³ Cabaud, 35.

²⁴ Anderson, 21.

²⁵ Anderson, 22.

²⁶ Anderson, 22.

Greeks figured prominently in Alain's teaching, and his students' assessment of his pedagogic practice, so were they foundational in Weil's teaching and writing. Second, Weil imitated the classroom practice of her former teacher. As Cabaud notes, this pedagogic similarity can be expressed in their mutual affinity for "skilful [resolution of] an intellectual difficulty with a dazzling statement."²⁷ Weil also copied Alain's pedagogic style more broadly; she is said to have preferred a Socratic inquiry to "teaching to the test."²⁸

Weil's departure from Alain

Person of Weil as student

Though Weil was influenced significantly by the person and philosophic practice of her teacher, Alain, she also had personally-held convictions which, at times, conflicted with his. Her now famous encounter with fellow École Normale student Simone de Beauvoir demonstrates her fundamental departure from her beloved teacher. De Beauvoir tells the story in her autobiographical *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*.

[Weil] asserted in a strident voice that only one thing matters today on earth and that is the Revolution which is to feed the whole world. I retorted, in a no less peremptory fashion, that the problem was less how to increase human well-being than how to discover the meaning and value of human existence. She looked me up and down: 'It is easy to see you have never been hungry.'²⁹

This striking picture of Weil's passion for the hungry as primary to existential and metaphysical concerns shows the importance she placed on the direct applicability of her philosophical work to the deep needs of the world. While showing a marked difference between the philosophical commitments of de Beauvoir and Weil, this encounter also

²⁷ Cabaud, 35.

²⁸ Anderson, 27.

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

highlights Weil's departure from the non-partisan revolutionary sensibility of the typical French philosopher. Even as a student, she refused to engage in the typical French philosopher's practice of detaching thought from life—a detachment exercised by Alain. On the contrary, "Simone [Weil] committed herself to her ideas at once and entirely and felt bound to put them into immediate action; she could tolerate no compromise whatever. This characteristic was widely recognized among her fellow students at the École Normale who called her 'the Categorical Imperative in skirts.'"³⁰

Her uncompromising stance in putting her philosophical attachment to the Revolution into practice led her in her later school years to begin teaching at something of a working men's college founded by one of her fellow students.³¹ This experience was central to Weil's continued development both because it continued to bridge her thought and action through teaching, but also because of the profound development that she witnessed in some of her students. Cabaud can not state emphatically enough: "This incident might have been unimportant to others, but to Simone Weil it was a revelation confirming both Alain's views on the proletariat and the worth of the vocation, the special type of sainthood which she now regarded as the whole orientation of her life."³² This vocational success in her pedagogic relationship with working class men would be only the first of many such experiences in her life—pedagogic opportunities that she sought quite vigorously.

³⁰ Cabaud, 36.

³¹ Cabaud, 39.

³² Cabaud, 39.

Weil as a Teacher

Her passion for putting her thought into action and for teaching philosophy to the proletariat continued after the successful completion of her degree at the École Normale. Though she had originally postponed her request for a teaching post, hoping instead to engage in factory work for a year, she did submit her request in the middle of August, 1931, asking specifically for a placement in an industrial town roughly near Paris.³³ Unfortunately, according to rumor, the placement coordinator was firmly set on “[sending] the Red Virgin [Weil’s nickname] as far away as possible so that we shall never hear of her again.”³⁴ Her request was rejected and she was sent to a small post in the south of France, Le Puy. After receiving her assignment, Weil again applied to the ministry for a change of post, suggesting a known vacancy in Valenciennes. Once again, she was roundly rejected—“If an *agrégée* has the right to a post in a lycée, that does not signify that she has the right to choose her post, or to annul any appointment whatever in order to possess herself of the post that she desires.”³⁵ After a holiday with her family, Weil left to take up her position at Le Puy.

From her first day in the classroom, Weil’s students knew there was something extraordinary about their teacher. Though her actions were often clumsy and awkward, her sentences often fragmentary and inelegant,³⁶ her students saw past this to its deep

³³ According to her letter to the Ministry of Education, she requested a post in Le Havre—which was also supported by a recommendation from a friend, or “an industrial town in the North or the Centre.” Cabaud, 43 and Pétrement, 74.

³⁴ Pétrement, 74.

³⁵ Cabaud, 43.

³⁶ There are many instances of this, especially noted in her early days of teaching. Pétrement notes that her students took on a motherly role with respect to Weil—in one case even making sure that her backwards sweater was put on correctly (Pétrement, 78). Cabaud notes “Simone Weil would start a sentence, then interrupt herself, and... ask the help of her audience” (53).

pedagogic value. They claim, “everything about her emanated a feeling of total frankness and forgetfulness of self, revealing a nobility of soul that was certainly at the root of the emotions she inspired in us, but that at first we were not aware of.”³⁷ Weil’s awkward style, without the usual pedagogic hooks to keep students interested in the subject matter, still managed to absorb and engage her students. Though some commentators insist that the attentiveness of her students should be exclusively a testament to their own diligence,³⁸ Weil’s non-traditional pedagogic practice was most likely an important factor as well.

One of the most important components in this teaching practice lies in Weil’s desire to form, rather than *inform* her students.³⁹ Her evaluators from the ministry of education were well aware of this aspect of Weil’s teaching, though they were not altogether supportive of it. One said, “In philosophy, she develops the personality of her pupils, rather than the knowledge required for the *baccalauréat*.”⁴⁰ In another statement, demonstrating the importance she placed on connecting thought to life, a ministry evaluator said, “[the children] have, above all, the feeling that Mlle Weil takes them out of school exercises and puts them in touch with real life.”⁴¹

This pedagogic desire to form pupils through a connection to “real life” manifested itself in two ways. First, Weil engaged in the practice of expounding on an

³⁷ C. Claveyrolas, S Faure, Y Argaud, M Dérieu, “Simone Weil professeur,” *Foi et éducation* (May 1951), pp. 170-173. As quoted in Pétrement, 78.

³⁸ Anderson states, “It says much for the seriousness of the pupils that she seems to have had no problems of discipline” (26).

³⁹ Cabaud, 53.

⁴⁰ Cabaud, 97.

⁴¹ Cabaud, 98.

idea by exploring and connecting all related ideas (abstract but also experiential). This practice took a simple idea and made it complex by addressing its relationships to other ideas, especially those that arose experientially. The practice demonstrates Weil's compelling desire to fully integrate her thought with life. The second practice spoke to her engagement with students; she relied on student contributions to further her words' successes in mediating ideas.⁴² This latter practice testifies to Weil's awareness of the insufficiency of language to fully convey the complexity of her thought, as well as her desire to reach her students through mediation⁴³ on their level. It is because of this importance she places on her students' personal engagement with ideas that she insisted on "an authenticity in [her students'] writings which could only come from personal experience. Everyday life was the real source she wanted them to draw from."⁴⁴ Through the combination of these two typically Weilian practices, she was leading her students, by example, to engage in the connective and mediating philosophic practice which would continue to be a feature of her written work.

True to her commitment to exercise her beliefs politically and continue the work she had begun at the working men's college in Paris, Weil's pedagogic commitments stretched far beyond her 12 philosophy students at Le Puy. During her time in Le Puy,

⁴² Cabaud, 53-55.

⁴³ Weil's notion of mediation does connote a relationship between two concepts/things by means of the language that makes that connection possible, though it moves beyond this simplistic understanding and takes on a central and pervasive role in Weil's work. For Weil, mediation is a necessary and philosophically charged concept for understanding the order of the world and our human relationship to it. She uses mediation prominently in understanding her pedagogy. In her early writing, she uses the concept of the non-rational $\sqrt{2}$ as the mediation between the two sides of a right isosceles triangle (the diagonal of a square) as her symbol for mediation. After her conversion, Weil used Christ as a symbol for mediation, extending this religious concept to human understanding in various fields including science, mathematics and philosophy. Accordingly, mediation accrues an increasingly significant spiritual significance in addition to its constant intellectual importance in Weil's work throughout her life.

⁴⁴ Cabaud, 121.

Weil became involved in teaching French and political economy to miners in the nearby city of Saint-Étienne, where she had made contacts through her involvement with the United General Confederation of Labor.⁴⁵ Pétrement tells us that Weil's "meetings with her comrades at Saint-Étienne were among her greatest joys."⁴⁶ It is therefore not entirely surprising that these classes were duplicated in Le Puy, when several workers came up to her asking for a course on Karl Marx.⁴⁷ Though her pupils' backgrounds were quite different from one another, Weil's distinctive style persisted. In order to be as clear as possible, she confined her lessons to one topic, and distributed an outline of her main points. In this way, she adapted to her extra-curricular teaching practice her classroom practice of focusing on one idea and ascertaining its necessary connections. Above all, however, it is clear that Weil placed most value on the connections between the abstract theories she was teaching and their working out in the lives of her many, varied students.

In the years following her post at Le Puy, Weil would teach at Roanne, Auxerre and Bourges in official posts, in Saint-Étienne to miners and construction workers, and then spend a year of work in a factory. Unfortunately, her pedagogy did not reliably lead her students to passing grades on the baccalaureate exams⁴⁸ which, along with her often-disturbing political activity, led to regular dismissal from her posts. After her year-long post in Bourges and her year in Spain during the Civil War, she would only be assigned

⁴⁵ Pétrement, 89.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Pétrement, 120.

⁴⁸ Cabaud notes that in Auxerre, only 4 of her 12 pupils passed (79), which were statistics similar to that of her Le Puy students: only 5 of 14 avoided failure, and only 2 passed (57). Her students' successes in

one more post before the outbreak of war in France, in this instance a post at Saint-Quentin. Though this half-year post (she asked for a leave in January, due to her severe headaches) was her last government-assigned teaching post, however, it did not mark the conclusion of her pedagogic practice.

Summary:

Weil's pedagogic practice, as it grew out of and re-articulated her teacher Alain's, is most importantly characterized by its insistence on connecting thought with life. Though her lessons from and relationship with Alain provided an important framework for her later philosophic thought, especially in the figures she favored, her characteristic union of philosophy and life practice marks one of her most important breaks with her most formative teacher.

Analogous to the importance Weil placed on attaining a unity of thought and life, her short pedagogic biography as stated here shows Weil's concern with connecting her formal philosophy classrooms to the politically and socio-economically driven world beyond it. Dividing her teaching time between her philosophy students and the working-class and unemployed men who sought philosophical training, Weil carried out her convictions.

Together, Weil's philosophic way of life and her commitment to philosophic education beyond the formal classroom setting pave the way for the investigation that the remainder of this thesis will undertake. Because this quick biographical sketch opens up the possibility of conceiving Weil's pedagogic practice outside a formal classroom situation, it allows work in the following chapters to consider the pedagogical

Bourges are a notable exception to these consistently disappointing performances—here only 3 of her nine students failed their baccalaureate (121).

components in her writing as well. Inasmuch as her writings reflect the important philosophical figures mentioned and her life practices, we will see how Weil continues to bridge thought and life, in the classroom and beyond.

Chapter 2: Marcus Aurelius and Philosophy as a Way of Life

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we saw that in Weil's pedagogic formation she encountered not only the texts of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but also their sense of philosophy as a schooled art of right living. Though Weil arguably took this way of life to heart more than her teacher Alain, her connection to his formative pedagogy—especially as it relates to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy—was crucial to her later work. Accordingly, this chapter leaves behind Weil's particular schooling situation to discover the substance of that schooling, as it would come to affect her philosophy of education and her *Notebooks*, which we will examine in the following chapters.

Quick reading of any of Weil's texts reveals that her engagement with ancient philosophy was not confined merely to her philosophical education. Her passion for Platonic, Stoic and other ancient literature is clear in any of Weil's available texts, perhaps most explicitly and extensively in *La Source grecque* and *Intimations pré-chrétiennes*—combined in the English volume *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*.⁴⁹ These essays are filled with Weil's engagement with the ancient Greeks, including her concerns about Plato and God, her treatment of various ancient Greek dramas (*Antigone* above all) and her famous work on Homer's *Illiad*: “The *Illiad* or Poem of Force” which relates to the meaning of labour.

⁴⁹ Simone Weil, *La source grecque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955); Simone Weil, *Intimations pré-chrétiennes* (Paris: La Colombe, 1951); Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 1957).

Indeed, so prevalent is this tradition in her thought that Eric O. Springsted and E. Jane Doering undertook to edit a volume exploring one specific feature of Weil's ancient philosophical engagement: her *Christian Platonism*. The introduction to this volume states, "[Simone Weil's] social and religious thought is thoroughly infused both with references to Plato and with a Platonic spirit; she wrote numerous essays on Plato and the ancient Greeks—because she thought they were important for the present."⁵⁰ Though authors often mention Weil's use of the entire Greek tradition, however, typical treatment (as in this volume) focuses particularly on her appropriation of Platonic themes. This focus leaves her engagement with the tradition as a whole and its general focus on philosophy as schooled practice of a flourishing way of life largely unmentioned.

Thankfully, as the editors note in their introduction to *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*,⁵¹ recent scholarship on the ancient philosophical tradition (including, but by no means limited to, Plato) has turned to this more positive and more prevalent impetus behind ancient philosophical practice. Pierre Hadot demonstrates the ancient Greek notion of philosophy as a way of life, focused on concrete application of general philosophic or spiritual exercises.⁵² Martha Nussbaum also takes up this theme as it relates more specifically to the Hellenistic Schools and therapeutic notions of

⁵⁰ Jane Doering and Eric Springstead (eds.), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2004), 2.

⁵¹ The introduction states, "in recent years the nature of Platonism, and Greek thought in general, has been reconsidered. It is now viewed much more favorably, and a much wiser balance is being struck." (2) However, as the title of the book suggests, "Greek thought in general" is left behind here in favour of a focus on Plato and Platonism.

⁵² Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002) and Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* trans. Michael Chase, edit. Arnold Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

philosophy.⁵³ It is this *practice* of philosophy, philosophy as a way of life, instead of particular ancient philosophical themes, that will concern us most in this chapter and throughout the rest of the thesis.

This orientation diverges from many other studies of Weil's engagement with the ancient Greek tradition, as they are mostly concerned with Weil's thematic concurrence or divergence from Platonism.⁵⁴ In this chapter, we will step back from a topics-driven discussion to ascertain the underlying attitudinal and pedagogical emphasis of ancient philosophers in their pursuit of flourishing life. Understandably, examining ancient, or even modern, texts for evidence of a philosopher's practice of philosophy as a way of life is a very different endeavor from that of a textually or thematically focused comparative project. In this study we need to pay careful attention to author and audience, as well as genre and the particular *way* the author conveys what s/he does. In order to make a strong comparison to Weil in later chapters, it is important that the ancient figure we examine here be as near as possible to Weil as regards these intangible, non-thematic realities.

Because of his participation in the practice of philosophy as a way of life, his exercise of its attendant personal pedagogy and his authorship of the *Meditations*, so near to Weil's own *Notebooks*, Marcus Aurelius is an obvious choice for an ancient comparative exemplar. Here we will focus on the particular features of his text that provide most helpful background for our examination of Weil in later chapters.

⁵³ Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁵⁴ As alluded to previously, *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* mentions the conception of philosophy as a way of life in conjunction with Plato only to show the more favorable light being cast on Platonism in recent years, not to draw any connections between this quintessentially ancient notion and its appropriation in Weil.

In order to set up the framework for later comparison, we will, in this chapter, briefly highlight three pedagogical motifs of Marcus' specific philosophical practice, as seen through his *Meditations*, that most directly correspond to characteristics we find in Weil, in her general philosophy of education as well as in her self-directed personal pedagogy, the subjects of the following two chapters, respectively.

First, we will examine the importance placed on contextually applied generic practices for the carefully situated person. We will focus on Marcus' self-directed language and the attention he pays to his particular context. Second, we will pay attention to the weight Marcus Aurelius gives to "Stoic doctrine" in relation to life practices in the *Meditations*. This second consideration connects also to Weil's notion of attention, which will be presented in a later chapter. Finally, we will treat Marcus Aurelius' use of mnemonic devices such as repetition and the importance he places on the bodily act of writing in relation to the formation of memory in the *Meditations*.

Understandably, these three features are bound up with one another in a way that makes them difficult to examine separately; there will be many instances where overlap is necessary. However, this linkage between a focus on the contextual application, the importance of practice and the emphasis on memory serves to show the holistic nature of the enterprise of philosophy as practiced by ancient philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius, and contemporary philosophers like Weil.

Contextual application of generic principles in Meditations

Meditations is a volume of self-directed philosophical exercises in which one observes Marcus Aurelius apply general Stoic exercises to his own life and its needs. In keeping with our later examination of *practical* emphasis, this orientation toward

concrete and specific application is necessarily personal and situated. While in the following section we will examine the active, practical dimensions of this philosophy (as way of life), here we will take an orientation toward its particular and personal situation. Marcus Aurelius' interior application of universally applicable Stoic exercises is evident in several ways. Not least of these is the persistent use of self-directed dialogue. Hadot and Birley both state that it is clear that "Marcus wrote for himself alone."⁵⁵ Indeed, this indicates the personal applicability of such commands as "begin each day by telling yourself:..."⁵⁶ and "make yourself good while life and power are still yours,"⁵⁷ which pepper the entire text. This voice, consistent with that of other Stoic thinkers like Epictetus,⁵⁸ supports the contention that Marcus Aurelius' focus is taken up with personal, perhaps even therapeutic concerns. It is however only one indication of such a contextual focus. Marcus Aurelius' engagement and interaction with his direct surroundings also speaks to his philosophical and pedagogic intentions.

The subject matter of the *Meditations* is demonstrably situational. This suggests that he tailored his admonitions and reminders to his own concrete needs. One of Marcus' recent biographers notes this while commiserating with ancient war historians who find little information about battles in Marcus' personal notes.⁵⁹ Anthony Birley

⁵⁵ Anthony Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 213; Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 33.

⁵⁶ Marcus, *Meditations* II.1

⁵⁷ Marcus, *Meditations* IV.17.

⁵⁸ For instance, see Epictetus' statements in *The Encheiridion*, "when you are about to undertake some action, remind yourself what sort of action it is" (c. 3) or "at each thing that happens to you, remember to turn to yourself and ask what capacity you have for dealing with it" (c. 10). Epictetus, *The Handbook* translated by Nicholas P White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 12, 14.

⁵⁹ Birley, 214.

explains that the purpose of *Meditations* was not to provide a documentary history of the many wars that Marcus witnessed and in which he participated for some external reader, but rather to provide him a way of coping with their significant ramifications in his own life. Birley states, “Although Marcus was writing in the middle of a terrible war, with other external preoccupations such as the plague and the revolt of Cassius, it has struck many how little obvious reference there is to external events.”⁶⁰ When looking instead for evidence of Marcus’ engagement with the philosophical and personal implications of the war, however, the references may well be more numerous. It is not unusual for Marcus Aurelius to focus on the significance of death, an obvious feature of life at war. In doing so, however, Marcus turns his thoughts past the bodily reality of physical death and its prevention to its philosophical significance for his own life. He says, “as surgeons always keep their lancets and scalpels always at hand for the sudden demands of their craft, so keep your principles constantly in readiness for the understanding of things both human and divine.”⁶¹

Again, most understandable in war and the proximity of death are Marcus’ reflections on the transience of human history. He says, for example, “survey the circling stars, as though yourself were in midcourse with them. Often picture the changing and rechanging dance of the elements.... Look back over the past, with its changing empires that rose and fell and you can foresee the future too. Its pattern will be the same, down to the last detail; for it cannot break step with the steady march of creation.”⁶² It is important to note first that this exercise is very personal, requiring a personal perspective

⁶⁰ Ibid..

⁶¹ Marcus, *Meditations*, III.13.

⁶² Marcus, *Meditations* VII.47-49.

on one's surroundings. It also assumes a strong correlation between the sub-lunary world that seems random and unintelligible and the supra-lunary world that is the opposite. Because of this correlation, one is to imagine that the sub-lunary existence on earth is ordered and intelligible, and thereby able to give meaning to personal existence in it as part of the trans-personal whole. Likewise, in his attempt to become resigned to the transient reality, he says, "expressions that were once current have gone out of use nowadays. Names, too, that were formerly household words are virtually archaisms today.... All things fade into the storied past, and in a little while are shrouded in oblivion."⁶³ While this statement has direct implications for the realities of life that were a daily struggle for Marcus, where life and death are always at stake, it also implies the importance of the continual *practice* of philosophy, and not just the presence of the words themselves.

Meditations and the Practice of Philosophy

In this section on the *Meditations*, especially, but also in the section that follows, we focus on Marcus' act of writing. More than simply being the way we come to know what was important in his philosophical practice, however, we see in these passages that emphasize the act of writing an intrinsic value in writing as a spiritual exercise. Hadot says in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, "the Stoics, for instance, declared explicitly that philosophy, for them, was an 'exercise.' In their view, philosophy did not consist of teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts, but rather in the art of living. It is the concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of

⁶³ Marcus, *Meditations*, IV.33.

existence.”⁶⁴ It is therefore our intention in this section to examine in what ways this exercise is manifest through what Marcus writes, and by his very act of writing itself.

The significance of the act of writing to this philosophy is to be found in reference to the general Stoic exercise of attention that can be seen in Marcus, and that has an important role in Weil’s practice of philosophy. As Hadot describes it: “Attention (*prosoche*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit.”⁶⁵ This constant contextual practice understandably leaves room for variations between what we think of as orthodox Stoic doctrine and what is articulated in a contextual exercise of attention. While in many instances Marcus Aurelius holds very closely to Stoic tenets, this emphasis on contextual practice make it less surprising to read in his biography that “the philosophy of life expressed in the *Meditations* is not orthodox Stoicism. It is the individual attitude to life of a man who has studied and thought for a long time about the problems of conduct and the different teachings of the philosophical schools, and has made his own selection, strongly influenced by his own experiences.”⁶⁶ But indeed, this emphasis on choice is not as far from the Stoic notion of philosophy as Birley may lead us to believe. The Stoic emphasis on choice is central: “the ‘function of one who philosophizes’ is a practical function, defined in terms of the development of powers of choice.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Pierre Hadot, *PWL*, 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁶ Birley, 221.

⁶⁷ Nussbaum, 329.

Writing takes a central focus in this development of the powers of choice. For Marcus Aurelius, it is in this physical act that he brings his personal experiences and thoughts into the Stoic doctrine he has learned. Martha Nussbaum states, “the words themselves are valuable only insofar as they move the listener to valuable mental and psychological activities. [...] Philosophers, we might say, should ‘shape and construct’ their own souls, cultivating compassion, perception, literary skill, and responsiveness to the individual pupil.”⁶⁸ It is precisely this practice which Marcus demonstrates so well in his *Meditations*, that of attention to his own experiences manifest with characteristic stylistic elegance for his own benefit.⁶⁹ Note that this focus on writing is on its personal and therapeutic value, not on “logical and linguistic inquiries” often associated with philosophy.⁷⁰ The philosophical practice emphasized here is focused on the practical concerns of learning how to live and die.

The practical orientation of philosophy in Marcus’ conception (consonant with the greater Stoic tradition), is seen here through emphasis on two important philosophical practices: attention and writing. Both are evident in Marcus’ *Meditations* and are examples of spiritual exercises that will also be important in Weil. In addition, these examples of philosophical practice underscore the importance of context (as seen in the previous section) and the function of memory—especially as it relates to writing (as seen below).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 330.

⁶⁹ Though Marcus’ literary attention is not focused in the direction of translating the precise Greek philosophical terms into the more vernacular Latin as some of his contemporaries did in order to make classic texts more accessible (Hadot, *IC*, 51-53), the *Meditations* were not without stylistic attention. Hadot states, “Marcus is present by virtue of his stylistic elegance. We have already seen that the Emperor, who was writing for himself, usually makes an effort to write with the greatest care, certainly because he is aware of the psychological power of a well-turned phrase” (*IC*, 257).

Mnemonic Efficacy in Meditations

Memory and mnemonic efficacy are central to Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and will come to the fore again in our treatment of Weil. We can find memory at work in two important ways: repetition and memorial inscription. These two principles of mnemonic efficacy were central in ancient culture, and are helpfully apparent in the *Meditations*.

Repetition functions in the *Meditations* by way of Marcus' formulation of Stoic themes passed down by previous thinkers and his self-instruction to remember them. Often the Stoic themes are alluded to by brief phrases, designed to recall what was taught previously. Hadot, in one section of his chapter devoted to the *Meditations* as spiritual exercises, treats these repetitious references to Stoic doctrine and terms them *kephalaia* or fundamental points. Hadot explains that Marcus' series of *kephalaia* center around the various themes important in Stoicism: the immensity of human nature, the eternal repetition of all things, and the importance of one's judgement about things.⁷¹ Beyond those contained in the *kephalaia*, there are other instances of near verbatim repetition, for instance: "all of us are creatures of a day; the rememberer and the remembered alike."⁷²

In addition to repetition for mnemonic purposes, Marcus Aurelius also repeatedly tells himself to remember, following in the philosophic practice of Epictetus. For instance, Marcus says, "erasing all fancies, keep on saying to yourself, 'It lies in my own hands to ensure that no viciousness, cupidity, or turmoil of any kind finds a home in this soul of mine...'. Remember this authority, which is nature's gift to you."⁷³

⁷⁰ Nussbaum, 350.

⁷¹ Hadot, *IC*, 38-41.

⁷² Found in both IV.35 and VIII.21. For other instances, see Hadot, *IC*, 49.

⁷³ Marcus, *Meditations*, VIII.29.

The second important way that memory functions in Marcus' *Meditations* is through writing as bodily inscription. Memorization was important in ancient philosophy, as Hadot says elsewhere, because this kept "the principles of life, the fundamental "dogmas," constantly "at hand.""⁷⁴ In this figurative way of stating the importance of memorization, we also understand the function of writing: having the memorized words "at hand." That is, words written by the hand are also written on the mind, and therefore become therapeutically efficacious.

Mary Carruthers pinpoints this use of writing for mnemonic efficacy and memorial inscription in *The Book of Memory*. She says, "writing is an activity of remembering, as remembering is writing on the tables of the mind."⁷⁵ Likewise, though more appropriate for her main purpose of explicating medieval reading and mnemonic practice, she writes, "like reading, writing depends on and helps memory. The shapes of the letters are memorial *cues*, direct stimuli to the memory.... Writing itself, the storing of information in symbolic "representations," is understood to be critical for knowing, but not its support (whether internal or external) or the implements with which it is performed."⁷⁶ Though Carruthers focuses here on medieval culture, she also shows how the medieval notions of memory are based on ancient tenets exemplified in Plato that would have also applied to Marcus. Both Plato and Marcus make use of the ancient notion as stated by Carruthers that "what we do in writing is itself a kind of memory."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Hadot, *PWL*, 133.

⁷⁵ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 111.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

It is significant that he commands himself at one point (III.14) to “stop rambling” since he will “no longer reread the notes” that he had taken.⁷⁸ This self-command speaks to Marcus’ intentional refusal to engage in the editing work and supplementary concerns of writing, instead using his writing chiefly as a mnemonic tool. In this sense, he is to supplement his writing with continued reading of his own and others’ work, though this is also for his ultimate therapeutic goal of mnemonic effect, not because they will help him perfect any work he had already done for later audiences. Hadot states, “from the point of view of the imminence of death, one thing counts and one alone: to strive always to have the essential rules of life present in one’s mind, and to keep placing oneself in the fundamental disposition of the philosopher, which consists essentially in controlling one’s inner discourse....”⁷⁹ Of course, we only witness this inner discourse through its written form as Marcus’ *Meditations*—a form coming out of a practice that Hadot places firmly within the same realm as that of inner dialogue as exemplified by writing in one’s own hand. He states the importance of personally writing one’s own inner dialogue instead of dictation to another person because of its link to a more intimate, direct reflection. “The presence of another to whom one speaks or dictates, instead of speaking to oneself, makes inner discourse in some way banal and impersonal. This in all probability is why Marcus too wrote his *Meditations* in his own hand.”⁸⁰

This more intimate link with one’s own inner discourse through the act of physically writing provides a bridge to the importance of the connection between one’s mind and body. Hadot states, “the goal is to reactualize, rekindle, and ceaselessly

⁷⁸ Translation, Hadot, *IC*, 30.

⁷⁹ Hadot, *IC*, 31.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

reawaken an inner state which is in constant danger of being numbed or extinguished.”⁸¹

Through the physical act of repetitive writing, Marcus impressed fundamental Stoic tenets into his daily life, reinforcing philosophy’s primary status as a way of life, and holding the beliefs or tenets as means to that end. Indeed, in keeping with our findings above about philosophy as a practice, it is appropriate to stress the importance of Marcus Aurelius’ methodology, but also that this method contributed to the mnemonic efficacy of Stoic beliefs and their consequent therapeutic value in his daily life.

Summary

In conclusion, we find in Marcus’ *Meditations* an example of the ancient philosophical practice of philosophy as a way of life, centered by focused engagement in various spiritual exercises. Examining the significance of his contextual address, and the common opinion that these *Meditations* were for Marcus’ exclusive use, as well as his many concretely applicable generic statements, we find importance placed on particular context for philosophical exercise. In other words, we find Marcus’ particular exercise of philosophy as a way of life through concrete personal application of universal principles. Not only is it prevalent in these pages, however. This focus on oneself as the object for philosophy—for the attainment of flourishing life—is pedagogically important throughout ancient philosophy, as well as Simone Weil as we shall see.

Secondly, we find in the *Meditations* an emphasis on philosophy as practice linked strongly to writing, and to the notion of *prosoche*—which Weil will pick up significantly as “attention.” The deeply meditative and self-reflexive practice of attention has been here (and in Weil’s work) translated into a textual engagement, allowing us to see through writing the importance of authorial reflection on personal praxis.

⁸¹ Ibid., 51.

Finally, we examined the importance of repetition and the act of writing for mnemonic efficacy in the *Meditations*. Marcus would write as he found certain teachings particularly helpful for his current need. Because some of these needs were persistent, repetition of themes common to Stoic discourse was frequent. This repetition in writing, as opposed to rereading for supplemental or secondary concerns, underscores again the importance of writing and daily re-formulation of truths for bodily inscription. We therefore found that both repetition and writing to be important for the memorization that keeps particular teachings “at hand.”

This ancient philosophical context for viewing Weil’s later work is important not only because we know she read Marcus Aurelius, as well as other significant Stoic philosophers,⁸² but also because these themes and methods will recur in the work she did throughout her life. In the next chapter, we will examine the ways in which Weil’s pedagogy—as demonstrated through her *Lectures on Philosophy* and through her more pedagogically explicit early texts⁸³—recalls features of the pedagogical training of ancient philosophical practice. The final substantive chapter will treat Weil’s “care of self” in her later texts⁸⁴ as it also recalls ancient practice exemplified by our study of Marcus here.

⁸² See Weil, *FLN*, 19-20.

⁸³ For instance, her essay entitled “Reflections on the Right use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” in *WG*.

⁸⁴ Most specifically, *FLN*.

Chapter 3: Simone Weil's Philosophy of Education and Educational Practice

Introduction

After examining several features common to philosophy as a way of life in the ancient conception, we turn now to see how Weil's practice both in and outside the classroom is reminiscent of this ancient orientation to philosophy. Because of the richness of the connection between Weil's and the ancient philosophy of right living, we will treat it in two discrete analyses in the next two chapters. The present chapter will examine Weil's philosophy of education and its employment in the classroom, paying close attention to those features of it that allude to a therapeutic practice similar to the practices of the Stoic schools as demonstrated by Marcus Aurelius' example in the previous chapter. The following chapter will take up the conjunction of Weil's pedagogy and auto-philosophical therapy, or, put otherwise, her own self-directed action.

As we examined Stoic pedagogy in the form philosophy as a way of life and what it means to learn such a philosophy, so too we must examine how Weil understands education. Her answer to questions like "what are the goals of education?" and "what are the means of attaining those goals?" provide a basis for understanding how it works in her classroom practice (end of this chapter) and in her own philosophical care of self (following chapter). Thus, this chapter will begin with Weil's philosophy of education. In it, we will discover two features—attention and memory—which are also important features of her personal care of self. This chapter will move to discuss how Weil works out her pedagogical intentions through her classroom practice, evidenced in her use of three distinct yet related pedagogic tools. Throughout the investigation of her use of

these tools, we will connect them to her practical usage, either through notes of her *Lectures on Philosophy* or through her own reflection on their practical benefits.

Weil's philosophy of education

Simone Weil's last written words were, "the most important part of teaching =to teach what it is to know."⁸⁵ This statement, and its presence in her consciousness just before her death, speaks volumes to the importance Weil places on education, and what she perceives as its most important lesson—to "teach what it is to know." Note that the importance of education is not "*knowing*" in its acquisitive/instrumentalist sense⁸⁶, but the *meaning* of knowing. Thinking is a kind of looking, and the result of looking (seeing), changes our metaphors and shifts the structures of meaning.⁸⁷

Though Weil never wrote her philosophy of education in so many words, there are various places within her texts where one can glean answers to the questions above that may give us clues to her chosen emphases in education. Not the least of these texts is her essay entitled "Reflections on the Right use of Schooling with a View to the Love of God."⁸⁸ Though this text was certainly written with France and Weil's perception of its religious weakness in mind,⁸⁹ it also provides us with a glimpse into her view of education and its ideal aims. Likewise, in "The Needs of the Soul" Weil states what is necessary for full human functioning. This chapter from *Need for Roots* will also be

⁸⁵ Weil, *FLN*, 364.

⁸⁶ Henry LeRoy Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, (New York: Continuum International Publishers Group, 1999), 144 N.17

⁸⁷ Finch, 41.

⁸⁸ As found in Simone Weil, *WG* 105-116.

⁸⁹ TS Eliot, Preface to the *NR* trans. AF Willis (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), vii.

important in our view of her use of education⁹⁰ and our examination of the connections between Weil's practice and that of her ancient philosophical exemplars.

Emphasis on concrete application of generic principles

In ascertaining Weil's philosophy of education, we must first uncover the nature of the person to be educated. Only through explanation of Weil's idea of the person and his/her attendant needs⁹¹ can we determine the shape that education must take. In keeping with the spiritual exercises that we discovered in the last chapter, Weil emphasizes the personally situated nature of need- and obligation-bearing persons. She emphasizes the importance of individual obligations over and against those seen to accrue to collectivities. This is a striking point to make in the beginning of her treatise on the "Declaration of Duties toward Mankind," meant as a manifesto for post-war political restructuring in France. Consequently, the claim has significant status as a foundational claim in one of Weil's most influential political texts, and it resonates with the necessarily contextualized philosophical pedagogy around cosmopolitan obligation seen among the ancient Stoics, it is important to understand this point in some depth.

She states starkly at the outset of this text that, "Obligations are only binding on human beings. There are no obligations for collectivities, as such. But they exist for all human beings who constitute, serve, command or represent a collectivity...."⁹² Weil's

⁹⁰ Sandra Warren Gehrig also notes the importance of Weil's "Needs of the Soul" for Weil's philosophy of education. (Sandra Warren Gehrig, "Education as Spiritual: Reflections on Simone Weil's "The Needs of the Soul,"" [Unpublished MA thesis: Hamline University, 1992], 33-42). Here she itemizes how each need reflects an important characteristic of Weil's philosophy of education. I will not explicate each need as Gehrig does, but will generalize important obligations on humans, and what this may mean for Weil's view of education's role.

⁹¹ As a corrective to the limited thinking of the French revolutionists who were concerned with *rights* for human beings, Weil is concerned with the human soul as eternal, and therefore bound by obligations which are also eternal—transcending all conditions (*NR*, 4).

⁹² Weil, *NR*, 4.

emphasis on *obligation* here at the outset of her text is an obvious corrective to the much earlier French Revolution's emphasis on *rights* that persisted as an important part of French culture. It is important to note that she does not emphasize antecedent human *needs*, as the English title of the book may suggest, but what comes *before* needs, that is, human obligation to them.⁹³ Weil underscores this point throughout the opening pages, saying further, "all human beings are bound by identical obligations..."⁹⁴ and "this obligation is not based upon any *de facto* situation..."⁹⁵ She further emphasizes the nature of obligations, as antecedent to the human and collective needs that they are to meet by stating the "eternal," "unconditional" and "foundation-less" nature of an obligation.⁹⁶ These three traits are co-extensive with one another, and speak to the universal nature of obligations for all people. Therefore, her focus in this prelude to *Need for Roots* is not on what one needs, primarily, but rather what is one's obligation to others. Instead of reinforcing the French Revolution's self-centered demands, Weil's

⁹³ Indeed, this is a Kantian notion; though Weil does not mention it here, she refers to her agreement with Kant's notion of means and ends in conjunction with Kant's moral imperative in her *Lectures on Philosophy*. The appropriate treatment of any person comes about only by seeing that person as an end in his/herself. Here the obligation to other human souls is paramount. Weil states, reinforcing Kant, "each person wills the moral law, decrees it even as God does, in the realm of ends" (*LP*, 183). While this is true in the world of ends (the transcendent reality—that is, that reality not bound by the necessity common to Earth), however, this is seemingly impossible in the world of means. Weil states, "here below it is impossible to treat men otherwise than as if they were things, means" (*LP*, 182). However, Kant affirms that there is no incompatibility between the world of ends and the world of means—"you ought, therefore you can" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* trans. TK Abbott (Longmans, Green, London, 1901), pp. 106 ff. And 126 ff.). Weil supports Kant's conclusion but talks about this gap between the worlds of means and ends somewhat differently in a later text: *Intuitions Pré-Chrétiennes*. She says here that necessity is the mediator between matter and God (*IPC*, 152). See also Rush Rhees' *Discussions of Simone Weil* edited by DZ Phillips (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 99.

⁹⁴ *NR*, 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

morality, and consequently, her pedagogy, centers on the other, the concrete existent person, whose needs one has a primary obligation to fill.

When developing her thoughts on the carrying out of an obligation, Weil is again careful to emphasize the particularity and situatedness of the human needs. She says, “the object of any obligation, in the realm of human affairs, is always the human being as such.”⁹⁷ The ‘human being as such’ here refers to a general understanding of human nature, a general understanding that she particularizes in a later statement: “this obligation makes different attitudes, actions necessary according to different situations.”⁹⁸ In other words, just as obligations are particularly and humanly situated and bound, so are their attendant needs.⁹⁹

Moreover, in her explication of the human soul’s need for equality, she once again emphasizes this obligation to the individual through differentiation of (ideally) equal tasks. She explains the healthy results of a general and a soldier fulfilling their different yet equally valued tasks, “at the same time the soldier admires the general and the general the soldier.”¹⁰⁰ Because each need of every soul has its opposite in Weil’s construction, however, she follows by stating the soul’s vital need for hierarchy. This too underscores the emphasis on the individual human being (of any status), because those in superior positions are not to be regarded as superior *individuals*, but rather as *symbols*. Those who exercise power in this necessary hierarchism are symbols of “that realm

⁹⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁹ Weil’s notion of the individual is that person or thing which has eternal value. It is in this sense that one should read “individual” when it is treated later on.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 18.

situated high above all men and whose expression is made up of the obligations owed by each man to his fellow men.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, human beings are to venerate those persons who exercise power as they are symbolic of the eternal obligation between human beings.¹⁰² Weil states, “[hierarchism] is composed of a certain veneration, a certain devotion towards superiors, considered not as individual, nor in relation to the powers they exercise, but as symbols.”¹⁰³

But why do collectivities—governments, churches, businesses etc.—as such not also fall into the system of obligations and needs? They do not, because, “only human beings have an eternal destiny. Human collectivities have not got one... Duty to the human being as such—that alone is eternal.”¹⁰⁴ Again, notice the emphasis on the particular person, as a part of the whole of humanity. While duties accrue to concretely situated human existents and must therefore be met in equally concrete ways, these obligations are, and remain “absolutely identical for everybody.”¹⁰⁵ Only human beings have eternal destinies, and the importance of any collectivity rests only in its identity as being composed of these eternally-destined individuals.

Collectivities do not remain without importance in the fulfillment of these personally situated obligations, however. Weil states several reasons why they are necessary and worth preserving. Collectivities are worthy of respect because they are

¹⁰¹ Ibid..

¹⁰² Sandra Warren Gehrig, “Education as Spiritual: Reflections on Simone Weil’s ‘The Needs of the Soul’” (Unpublished Masters Thesis: Hamline University, 1992), 39.

¹⁰³ Weil, *NR*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 7.

“food for a certain number of human souls.”¹⁰⁶ In addition, they are unique, irreplaceable and continuous in relation to the past (“preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead”) and future (“contain[ing] food... for the souls of beings yet unborn”).¹⁰⁷ For these reasons, they are of great importance as a means (Weil makes the analogy to a cornfield, which provides physical food, while collectivities provide for the needs of the soul¹⁰⁸) and may necessitate a human obligation toward it. Again, however, Weil is careful to note that the obligation to a collectivity does not for this reason become more important than that of the existent human being. “It may happen that the obligation towards a collectivity which is in danger reaches the point of entailing a total sacrifice. But it does not follow from this that collectivities are superior to human beings.”¹⁰⁹ The concretely situated person remains of premier importance, but it is also emphasized that this person is a member of at least one collectivity, and also that each collectivity consists of persons.¹¹⁰

Because of the correlativity of individual person and collectivity, Weil can address collectivities, *as a collection of persons*, as sharing in the obligation for meeting

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁰ There are a few points of connection to Weil’s Marxist roots that are necessary to interject here. First, in this, one of her latest writings, Weil demonstrates a significant departure from Marxist thought, especially in her attitude toward collectivities. Rhees says, “Weil did not think, as the Marxists did, that this [overcoming exploitation] could be provided through the increase of rationalising of social organization” (74). Likewise, here Weil is interested in the collectivity and its health analogously to that of a human being. For instance, she is interested in the survival of the national collectivity, France, for the reasons stated above for valuing collectivities. She is not interested in the collectivity for only its economic value, as is the case with Marxists (40). However, Weil did have more in common with Marxist tenets concerning social organization in her earlier text *Oppression and Liberty*. Here she is closer to Marxist notions to the extent that Rhees says, “Marx and Weil in this essay have been led into ‘blind’ abstraction in discussing human societies” (20). However, this criticism is far from her concrete emphases here.

the needs of individuals, participating in the health of an individual human being's soul. It is this emphasis on the obligation of the collectivity (which falls to it on account of its individual members) where we see again the medical/therapeutic metaphor as well as the emphasis on education. Weil maintains in her explication of the human soul's need for responsibility that one must have an awareness of one's place within the social organism. In order for this to happen one "must be made acquainted with [the entire range of activity of the social organism to which one belongs], be asked to interest [one]self in it, be brought to feel its value, its utility, and where necessary, its greatness...."¹¹¹ In other words, in order to meet the need of the human soul to claim responsibility for his/her part in the functioning of the social body, the social body itself must educate its members to the nature of their role within the social organism.

When this obligation to education is successfully met by a collectivity, Weil insists that it aids in the health of its members' souls, but when it doesn't it is "diseased and must be restored to health."¹¹² This refrain is echoed throughout her exposition of the needs of the soul. Where collectivities (again as composed of concrete existent persons with obligations) fail to meet a (or several) human need(s), this failure causes a barrier to the social organism's health and therefore that organism must be healed. Weil states clearly the destructive power of a collectivity blind to the needs of its members' souls: "there are collectivities which, instead of serving as food, do just the opposite: they devour souls. In such cases, the social body is diseased, and the first duty is to attempt a

¹¹¹ *NR*, 15.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

cure, in certain circumstances, it may be necessary to have recourse to surgical methods.”¹¹³

In sum, Weil’s emphasis on the needs and obligations of the person, especially as related to, but always distinct from that of collectivities recalls the emphasis in the last chapter on the necessarily concrete and personal focus of any pedagogically oriented spiritual exercise or therapy. It is striking that this personal focus persists in Weil’s work intended for political (i.e. social organism/collectivity) reconstruction, and therefore all the more significant for our understanding of Weil’s ultimate concern. The value of a collectivity is in its provision of “food for a certain number of souls.”¹¹⁴ It is consequently subordinated to those concrete human instances, those souls in which it consists. Furthermore, we have seen how Weil focuses on a personal, situational application of general principles, engaged by individual members of society or their collectivities. This also coincides with the pedagogic practice seen in the previous chapter, where one’s needs, and their attendant “cures” were concretely applied, though generally recognized to access what is universal in the person, the nature, in Stoic terms, what is eternal in Weil’s terms. In addition, Weil’s emphasis here on the material needs and obligations of the human *soul* also reminds us of our findings in the ancient philosophical pedagogy that were based on a materialistic understanding of the person. Weil continues in a comparable vein with the Stoics through her affirmation that sickness can obtain to soul as well as the body, and that this soul sickness/disease may be addressed through concretely focused philosophical education.

¹¹³ Ibid., 8-9.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

Emphasis on Attention

It is important in a philosophy of education that there be explicit awareness of the nature of the person to be educated. But it is equally important that there be proper awareness of the means of his/her proper education. Whereas the last section emphasized Weil's focus on the individual need- and obligation-bearing human being as the recipient of this socially and personally significant, concretely-focused pedagogy, we will now look at her preferred means for exercising this pedagogy. Though we will focus on the more particular means she employs in the latter half of this chapter, this portion on the general outlines of her philosophy of education will treat a significant motif of Weil's ideal for educational practice. Throughout her texts, we will find Weil insist that "attention" is the means (and goal) for proper education.¹¹⁵ As before, we will examine this concept on Weil's terms but with an ear to how it echoes the ancient Stoic practice introduced in chapter two.

In her most explicitly pedagogical text, "Reflection on the Right use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," Weil begins with a discussion of attention. She says, "the key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God."¹¹⁶ This re-orientation to education, through the emphasis on prayer, and especially Weil's drawing attention to "attention," is more significant than it may initially seem. Indeed, attention is important not only in this essay on school studies, but also throughout

¹¹⁵ Note the careful consideration of means and ends here. In the previous section we discovered existent human beings as the only proper end, though collectivities could serve as means for providing for needs. Here we see the connection between means and ends again, but as they are joined in Weil's notion of attention as it functions pedagogically.

¹¹⁶ Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" in *Waiting for God* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1951): 105-116, 105.

her work, from her *Lectures on Philosophy* to *Gravity and Grace*. This latter text defines attention again in terms of prayer. Weil says here, “absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”¹¹⁷ With this strong connection between prayer and attention, and with its presence in an explicitly pedagogical text, Weil allows us to connect her pedagogy to that of the ancient spiritual exercises.

While Weil consistently underscores prayer as the ultimate direction for attention, she mentions it in connection to more immanent pursuits as training for this ideal: “unmixed” attention as prayer. “Prayer being only attention in its pure form and studies being a form of gymnastics of the attention, each school exercise should be a refraction of spiritual life.”¹¹⁸ In other words, inferior attention may serve as means to the end of prayer (or pure attention) when it is exercised in other subjects, though it is important only in its ability to unfold this ultimate goal of perfect prayer.

As means to this end, there are better and worse ways of practicing attention, but no one subject takes precedence over the other. Because of its ultimate aim, school studies as explained here function as spiritual exercises, whatever the subject matter. “A certain way of doing a Latin prose, a certain way of tackling a problem in geometry (and not just any way) make up a system of gymnastics of the attention calculated to give it a greater aptitude for prayer.”¹¹⁹

Weil stresses the importance of learning the practice of attention in a particular way. Through understanding of the *use* of attention as means, we see again the importance of concrete practice. Weil implies that the practice of attention in various

¹¹⁷ Weil, *GG*, 117.

¹¹⁸ *GG*, 120.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

school subjects should be different from one another. “Our first duty toward school children and students is to make this method [of waiting—attention] known to them, not only in a general way but in the particular form that bears on each exercise.”¹²⁰ This emphasis on concretely personal and situated learning underscores again her focus on personal needs/obligations, though we will see how the practice of attention shifts the understanding of individual as a *situated* individual. This is also true in how attention is learned. The practice may be learned with others but its exercise as relates to specific subjects and especially to God, must be pursued particularly, and most of all, concretely.

This proper use of attention, practiced in conjunction with any subject matter, is as Weil says, always finally for the goal of spiritual formation—prayer that is more attentive. In this case, school subjects, and the attention that they require, are utilitarian—not for their own sake but for the sake of one’s spiritual attentiveness. It is important to note that Weil does not equate this “spiritual effect” with a particular “religious belief,” but rather relates it to a desire for truth. “For an adolescent, capable of grasping this truth [the need of the other] and generous enough to desire this fruit [helping those in affliction] above all others, studies could have their fullest spiritual effect, quite apart from any particular religious belief.”¹²¹ This statement, in disclosing the true goal of attention (via school studies), connects us back to our investigation of the needs of the soul. Weil states here that it is through attentive waiting, as a “way of looking” that one is able to “receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in

¹²⁰ Weil, *WG*, 113.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

all his truth.”¹²² In so doing, one becomes aware of the needs of the other, and can do one’s part to assuage those needs.

This underscores an important point to add to our previous discussion of the concrete and personal situatedness of needs. While only individuals have needs (and only individuals have the obligation to address those needs), the individual can not be understood in isolation. In fact, attention can only be understood in its situatedness as an interpersonal practice. So, even as she continues to emphasize the singularity and concreteness of needs- and obligation-bearing beings, Weil’s focus on attentiveness links two or more such beings by asking the other-centered question: “what are you going through?”¹²³ It is through this question, and the proper “looking” that the attentive person exercises that “the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.”¹²⁴ Even in the absence of others, one can exercise this situated attentiveness, though it is implied that it is of much greater importance to exercise attentiveness in conjunction with other souls. Weil says, “In solitude we are in the presence of mere matter, things of less value (perhaps) than a human spirit. Its value lies in the greater possibility of attention. If we could be attentive to the same degree in the presence of a human being...”¹²⁵ Again Weil uses the means/end distinction to validate the importance of attention in human solitude only as a proximate end for the ultimate goal of exercising pure attention with other en-souled beings.

¹²² Ibid., 115.

¹²³ Ibid., 115.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *GG*, 121.

Weil mentions desire as another important feature of attention in relation to schooling (though always with its ultimate, spiritual end in mind). She says, “Love is the teacher of gods and men, for no one learns without desiring to learn. Truth is not sought because it is truth but because it is good. Attention is bound up with desire. Not with the will but with desire—or more exactly, consent.”¹²⁶ This distinction that Weil makes between an active “willing” and a more receptive “desire (or consent)” is an important one in connection to her philosophy of education. She says, “we have to endure the biting of the desire passively, as we do a suffering which brings home to us our wretchedness, and we have to keep our attention turned toward the good. Then the quality of our energy is raised to a higher degree.”¹²⁷ Weil speaks elsewhere about this notion of desire as attentive energy that involves body and soul,¹²⁸ yet also that which one receives into the void of one’s soul.¹²⁹

This notion of passive (or receptive) desire, especially in connection to attention, is important to our investigation of pedagogy in that it emphasizes the energy of attention (via desire) as separate from the object of that desire. Desire is central to pedagogy, but it must ultimately be separated from its immanent goal for the sake of pure attention. She says, “We have to go down to the root of our desires in order to tear the energy from its object. That is where the desires are true in so far as they are energy. It is the object which is unreal. But there is an unspeakable wrench in the soul at the separation of a

¹²⁶ Ibid., 118.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 121.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 22-4.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 25.

desire from its object.”¹³⁰ The ‘wrench in soul’ which Weil mentions here is in the disassociation between the learning, which through attention gave rise to our desire, and the desire itself, which should be directed toward its ultimate end, that is, prayer. At the end of this section, Weil explains that wholeness possible as a result of receptive desire exercised through attention to divine values. She says, “it is an attempt to make the divine values pass into ourselves. Far from thinking with all the intensity of which we are capable of the values to which we are attached, we must preserve an interior void.”¹³¹ While desire and learning are inextricably linked, therefore, in order to obtain the kind of pure attention that she treats here one must disassociate desire from its proximate ends and wait in anticipation for its ultimate end—pure attention focused (through waiting) on God.

Important in connection to our previous study of ancient practice is what this divine reality, gained through attention, means for our practical application. Weil’s brief mention of these practical uses of the discipline of attention is important in our further examination of her use of means and ends. While the ultimate end of attention (as learned through various school studies) is pure attention or prayer directed toward the transcendent, Weil notes that there are practical applications from this attainment of pure attention as well. She makes the distinction between attention and will to clarify this relationship: “We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will.... If inner purity, inspiration or truth of thought were necessarily associated with attitudes of this kind [that is, the kind associated with will], they might be the object of will. As this is

¹³⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹³¹ Ibid.

not the case, we can only beg for them. To beg for them is to believe that we have a Father in heaven.”¹³² In other words, though recognition of transcendent reality and “belief in our Father in heaven” and our deep connection to that reality is the ultimate end of attention in Weil, this practice also has practical application, through that very reality. This application moves in a different direction than the one between attention as learned in school studies and attention as prayer, seen above.¹³³ The practical exercise involved in treating one’s faults, in Weil’s understanding, assumes the relationship between the attentive supplicant and God in a way that school studies as gymnastics for attention do not. This realization does not change the direction of means and ends in relation to attention, though it does show Weil to be more practically concerned than one might assume from her strong emphasis on the transcendent direction of attention. In addition, it shows that this religious understanding of attention underscores the practical working out of one’s faults (again via attention), not an attitude of escapism.

In sum, Weil’s notion of attention is important to her pedagogic interests because it emphasizes a particular intra-personal understanding of knowing that begins with a receptive desire and is ultimately directed toward a spiritual understanding practically engaged. This notion of attention concerns us here in its similarity to the conception of spiritual exercises as practiced in the ancient Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. In both the ancient notion and in Weil’s articulation of it here, the spiritual exercise is directed specifically toward a way of life manifest through a particular action within the world.

¹³² Ibid., 116.

¹³³ See reference to the relationship between school studies and pure attention on page on page 47 above.

Emphasis on Memory

Memory is also important to consider in connecting Weil's philosophy of education to that of the Stoics. Our investigation of Weil's understanding of memory in pedagogy will be found mainly in the lecture notes of Madame Anne Reynaud-Guérhault, collected and titled in English, *Lectures on Philosophy*.¹³⁴ Commentators note that this is where Weil directly tackles "fundamental 'philosophical' issues,"¹³⁵ and also that it is obviously connected to her actual teaching practice. So, in her most self-consciously 'philosophical' and most pointedly pedagogical text, we find her view of the importance of memory. Though Weil seldom mentions memory in direct connection to her philosophy of education, it is important to mention it here for several reasons. First, memory relies heavily on the two previous notions of concreteness and attention. Second, memory was an important component of the philosophical way of life as practiced by the ancient philosophers, especially as we saw in Marcus Aurelius.¹³⁶ Through these connections, we will find that Weil's understanding of memory does

¹³⁴ As there are no extant copies of Weil's own lecture notes, this text attributed to Simone Weil is actually a collection of the copious notes from one of her students. While this may seem to be problematic in ascertaining Weil's teaching, it is instead highly instructive for several reasons. First, Hugh Price, the text's English translator commends these notes as "provid[ing] us with a fascinating glimpse of Simone Weil the teacher." Second, Peter Winch, who wrote the book's introduction states that this text is quite an achievement for such a young pupil. He states, "While it is inevitable that there should be moments when one wonders whether one is getting quite completely what Simone Weil had to say about a certain topic, such moments are surprisingly rare. I think there is not doubt that we have here a very substantial presentation of what was said in the lectures. Those who are familiar with Simone Weil's own writings will also at once recognise the authentic sound of her own voice." (3) Therefore, in this text we read a quite faithful rendering of Weil's thoughts and tone, as well get a picture of what Weil's teaching must be like for her students in order to result in such a text (i.e. her pedagogical tools and emphases).

¹³⁵ Peter Winch, Introduction to *LP*, 3. Winch qualifies this statement later by noting that Weil's later work questions many of the boundaries of "traditional philosophy," though it is helpful in some ways as a general statement about her work in this volume.

¹³⁶ See Chapter 2 "Mnemonic Efficacy in *Meditations*" on page 31.

indeed have significant implications for her philosophy of education, as well as for her appropriation of the ancient philosophical way of life.

Weil engages in two distinct discussions of memory/recollection. The first is in relation to her discussion of materialism in her *Lectures on Philosophy*. This is the discussion that will concern us most here, both because of its location in this pedagogically significant text, and because of its similar bodily emphasis to that of the Stoics. However, to understand her use more completely, we must also treat her understanding of memory/recollection when it engages its Platonic echoes in texts like *Intimations of Christianity* and *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*. Both understandings relate strongly to her discussion of attention, and complement each other in important ways. Because Weil's explanation and use of the Platonic notion of memory is complex and not the main focus of this thesis, I will treat this first and briefly in order to focus on the materialist, bodily understanding of memory more completely.

When discussing memory, *anamnesis* and amnesia in connection to Platonic philosophy, Weil sees memory as a *result* of attention. Here she understands memory as a consequence of human dual nature, a bridging of our immanent finite experience and our transcendent, spiritual experience. Springsted explains this process by which the finite, forgetful mind comes to a supernatural truth: "Weil observes what the phenomenon of memory is like in relation to "remembering" the supernatural truth. If there is some fact of which we have been in possession but forget it, then we direct our attention for a few moments to an empty space. Suddenly the thought is there."¹³⁷ This resultant memory implies "desire to know," as we mentioned in our discussion of

¹³⁷ Eric O. Springsted, " "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine..." in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* eds. Eric O Springsted and E. Jane Doering (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 214.

attention. It also implies that “when the thought does come back to us we have a sense that it is familiar, that it somehow belongs to us.”¹³⁸

It is this familiar, bodily implicated belonging that characterizes the materialistic understanding of memory that she examines through Bergson in *Lectures on Philosophy*. Weil explains that Bergson divides recollection from memory, though in a way distinct from that of Plato’s familiar separation in the *Meno*.¹³⁹ Bergson views recollection as a remembering bound in time, of a particular moment, a thought-based exercise.¹⁴⁰ In this formulation, memory (on the contrary) acts as a *general* re-apprehension of “traces of the past, without relating the object to some definite moment in the past.”¹⁴¹ In this case, memory is related more strongly to the body than recollection, “memory... takes place automatically to the body alone, and recollections only to thought.”¹⁴² Even in this bodily formulation, however, memory as a concept is not divorced from the way Weil understands attention. In a lecture on the capacities of the mind, she explains unconscious processes:

Complete attention is like unconsciousness.

3. Unconscious memory according to Bergson: one can explain it by a conditional reflex. For Bergson, the mind is a store of unconscious

¹³⁸ Ibid., 215.

¹³⁹ In the *Meno*, Plato is famously remembered for using the term “recollection” in order to get around the problems associated with knowing what one doesn’t know, coming to know what one doesn’t yet know and teaching one what he/she doesn’t already know. This conversation leads to Meno’s familiar paradox, and often the dismissal of *Meno* as a whole by some readers. Though common, Springsted maintains that this is an unhelpful and “naïve” reading of *Meno*, which is dropped in all other dialogues (Eric Springsted, “‘I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine...’” in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, edited by E Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004], 214). While this notion of recollection was certainly well-known to Weil, it is beyond her concern here with Bergson’s very different notion of recollection.

¹⁴⁰ Weil, *LP*, 54-55.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴² Ibid., 55.

memories which the body draws out of it. (Those become conscious which are in harmony with the state of the body.)
 One might just as well suppose that the body is a store of unconscious memories.¹⁴³

In one sense, therefore, this Bergsonian understanding of memory is compatible with the one above (relating to Plato's formulation of memory), since they both come out of an attentive process. It is important to note the bodily component in this second (Bergsonian) perspective, however, especially in our continuing discussion of Weil's philosophy of education. The memory resulting from the proper practice of attention (as seen above) is not entirely thought-bound and intellectual. It is also dependent on the state of the body for its ability to be made conscious (via recollection), and remains fundamentally bodily. Bell notices this as well, "Simone Weil gives us an epistemology that focuses on action linked to the "bodiliness of human beings," increasingly drawing away from and rejecting Descartes' mind—body dualism, and seeing the world from the perspective of one's "lived-body.""¹⁴⁴ This has important connections for attention. Because attention, as prayer, is a process of emptying oneself and engaging in (passive) receptivity, it is a reapprehension of a different self—one freed by grace—and as such, it prepares the body to receive the memory, in its capacity for bodily belonging and connectivity.

In Winch's introduction to her *Lectures on Philosophy*, he comments, along with Bell, on Weil's distinct thought development from her early work in *Science et perception dans Descartes*. The progression between the two texts can be accounted for

¹⁴³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 13.

by her engagement of perspectives different from her own. The strategy behind her engagement allows us understand to what extent Weil concurs with the materialist perspective that she portrays here. She says that she is trying out the materialist framework in order to, “defend ourselves against them later.”¹⁴⁵ This exploratory attitude marks a significant movement from her earlier ambiguous relationship to bodily understanding as demonstrated in *Science et perception*. Winch states that “bodily activity is left shrouded in mystery in *Science et perception*.”¹⁴⁶ It is important to have Weil’s exploratory yet more mature attitude in mind as we explore the bodily nature of memory in the educative process. Because she is exploring materialism to see whether it is a defensible position, the *Lectures* demonstrate an increasing openness to the role of the body in memory, which we should note as we associate memory as it appears in her philosophy of education with ancient Stoic memory and education. Through this situated investigation, we will see how her thoughts on attention and concrete personal application relate significantly to her development of memory as an important concept in one’s educational development.

Memory functions for Weil in relation to self-writing and to philosophy as a way of life. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, we will see how memory behaves in a bodily way, but also in a way that is explicitly connected to pedagogic practice, most notably a pedagogic practice that is reminiscent of the ancient Greeks and Stoics whom Weil so admired. For in fact, both self-writing and an understanding of philosophy as a way of life occur in the Stoic practice of philosophy. First, let us examine the way in

¹⁴⁵ Weil, *LP*, 40

which Weil's conception of memory works in her understanding of the practice of self-writing. She mentions this briefly in the *Lectures*, but its foundational assumptions about learning and bodily habit-formation are quite broad. Weil notes that the fundamental purpose in educating oneself and others is "to change the attitude of the body, to break with the associations which drive the spirit from hate to hate, etc."¹⁴⁷ She continues by saying, "the association of ideas, once it is properly understood, can then be of help in educating others and oneself."¹⁴⁸ Of course, memory is central in this bodily association of ideas, and memory, as a bodily, conditioned reflex, is developed by means of language, as she explains next.

"It is through language that every being [...] undergoes and at the same time brings about [...] a conditioned reflex."¹⁴⁹ Because memory was connected to conditioned reflexes before, it is not surprising that it is brought up once again in relation to language. Weil uses the example of the prisoner's way of remembering—writing names on the walls of his cell. Since Weil connects this use of language to "creating a conditioned reflex" she implies that it is the bodily writing itself, and not merely the looking back upon it that is significant for memory making. Even still, however, the value of the name's written-ness also extends to the prisoner's continual reception of those names into his eye. She underscores the importance of the action of language over and above the visual reminder (looking-back) by connecting the prisoner's practice of

¹⁴⁶ Winch, 5. This is also analogous to Wittgenstein's conceptual development in relation to concept formation and the thinking, willing subject, as Winch will continue to argue throughout the rest of the introduction.

¹⁴⁷ *LP*, 64.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

remembering living loved ones with the practice of commemorating the dead. She says, “[the prisoner] writes names on the walls of the prison to be sure of creating conditioned reflexes for himself), (one repeats a word, a phrase, one commemorates the dead).”¹⁵⁰ Hence, Weil places importance on the repetitiveness of language, not for re-reading (just as this was not the case in Marcus Aurelius’ work), but rather for the mnemonic benefit that language exercises on the bodily memory—whether written or spoken.

Memory also relates importantly to Weil’s understanding of philosophy as a way of life, as we have partly seen in Weil’s emphasis upon the importance of the *practice* of writing/speaking for memory. This emphasis also recalls, however, her connection with the practice of the ancient Greeks and Stoics. Cyril O Regan recognizes this in his description of Weil’s appropriation of Plato,

for Weil, anamnesis and amnesia in Orphism, and thus Platonism, refer not to *past* states of existence but rather to *essential* states of existence. *Anamnesis* refers to our attention to the transcendent dimension of our own and external reality. Similarly, amnesia is our ignoring of such reality and our consent here and now to live an unexamined form of life.¹⁵¹

Therefore, the memory-supporting practice of writing for oneself (as demonstrated chiefly by the prisoner and mourners) is central in an overall life practice that underscores the importance of a constantly examined life. Because the process of recalling or remembering is achieved through receptive attention, this is a practice that is important in one’s schooling, but is never complete—therefore suggesting the necessity of engaging in individual attentive remembering for oneself throughout one’s life.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵¹ Cyril O Regan, “Counter-mimesis and Simone Weil’s Christian Platonism” in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* eds. Eric O Springsted and E Jane Doering (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 193.

Weil's preferred pedagogic means

It is one thing to examine Weil's philosophy of education as a collection of important terms for her practice, how these notions relate to her overall body of work, and her appropriation of past philosophers' work. It would, however, be against the spirit of her understanding of these concepts to halt our investigation there, and fail to relate them to the individual practice out of which they were conceived. Because of the importance between thought and practice, and her understanding of philosophy as a way of life, the remainder of this chapter will focus on how these Weilian commitments to the concrete application of generic principles, attention and memory come to play in her pedagogic practice through her use of several different pedagogic tools. Though it is understandably impossible to separate the *matter* of one's subject from *how* it is communicated or taught, I will try to stay as focused as is possible on the function of Weil's tools and steer clear of an investigation of her subject matter.

We have approached Weil's texts in view of her philosophy of education. We are now able to see how she works out the components treated above through her distinctive pedagogic practices. Though we only have one text that provides a glimpse of her classroom practice (*Lectures on Philosophy*), many of the pedagogically rich themes explored above recur in her other texts, encouraging our treatment of the pedagogic tools found in conjunction with them here. In fact, by ascertaining the pedagogic implications for educational practice of these auxiliary texts, we are making space for analogous examination of her notebooks in the next chapter. In the coming pages, we will examine three of Weil's pedagogic practices (Contradiction, Analogy and Myth) and their non-exclusive occurrence in several of her texts.

Contradiction

Contradiction is an important feature in Weil's texts, and one that connects strongly to her practice of pedagogy and the discipline of attention. In order to understand more fully how Weil understands contradiction in relation to pedagogy, we will first examine some of her range of meanings for the deceptively simple term "contradiction" and their various attendant uses in her thought. Second, we will examine how contradiction in these different senses participates in the notion of means and ends, as does attention. Finally, we will draw conclusions for the meaning of this terminology and use for Weil's philosophy of education.

Though the term "contradiction" is abundant throughout Weil's texts, its referents can be quite diverse. Eric Springsted divides these uses into three categories—paradox, incommensuration¹⁵² and mystery.¹⁵³ Paradox refers to Weil's pedagogical usage of "contradiction," that is, her "method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true."¹⁵⁴ This sense of contradiction assumes that the things so opposed are not dichotomous. As she explains in her lecture on materialism, the purpose of the investigation is to use opposites to discover truth beyond the opposition. Weil says, "materialism and its opposite are correlative one to the other. It is by studying matter that we shall find mind."¹⁵⁵ In other words, to truly understand something (the opposite of materialism in this case), one must understand its

¹⁵² This is his term, which he uses to reference those Weilian uses of contradiction that are insoluble on the same plane.

¹⁵³ Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," in *The Beauty that Saves* eds. John M. Dunaway and Eric O Springsted (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 13-19.

¹⁵⁴ Weil, *GG*, 102 and *LP*, 93.

¹⁵⁵ Weil, *LP*, 40.

opposite correlative (materialism), since Weil is convinced that the opposing perspectives shed light on one another and support one's understanding of the whole in relation to its parts.

Incommensuration, in Springsted's analysis, refers to those instances of contradiction that are not resolvable on the same plane. These pairs of opposites, namely, contraries, are, however, resolved on a higher plane, and so "witness to aspects and dimensions of our existence of which we may not have been previously aware."¹⁵⁶ Weil saw incommensuration as pedagogically useful, for example, in the realm of mathematics.¹⁵⁷

The final use of contradiction, that use termed "mystery," is necessary on a plane where the previous forms of contradiction, that is, paradox and incommensuration, are inadequate. This sense of contradiction is appropriate only in that sense which is entirely beyond normal finite comprehension, that is, those areas pertaining to God. It is therefore not by coincidence that the example Springsted uses to explicate Weil's use is her treatment of the problem of evil.¹⁵⁸ Here mystery is used to understand those pairs of terms not reconcilable through other means (paradox and incommensuration), and those terms that "by suppressing and denying the mystery . . . is at the same time depriving the intelligence of treasures which are comprehensible to it..."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Springsted, "Contradiction," 17.

¹⁵⁷ For instance, when Weil treats the mediative properties of irrational numbers for those incommensurate relationships between the rational legs of a right isosceles triangle, she is using incommensuration as a pedagogic means (see *Notebooks*, 162).

¹⁵⁸ Springsted, "Contradiction," 19.

¹⁵⁹ Weil, *FLN*, 181.

Contradiction in these varied senses has a strong link to the discussion of means and ends in our previous treatment of attention.¹⁶⁰ The method of contradiction can be trained through traditional school studies, by use of paradox and incommensuration. These are important uses, expanding the students' grasp of reality, but they are ultimately only practice for the most important understanding of contradiction as mystery. Because this understanding, as the pure attention that gives rise to it, is focused on God, it is for Weil the highest end of contradiction. Weil also states the pedagogic purpose of contradiction as similar to that of attention, "contradiction is what pulls, draws the soul, toward the light"¹⁶¹ and also "contradiction is our path leading toward God."¹⁶² It is therefore the case that contradiction as paradox (or contrariety or correlation) or incommensuration cannot in itself make sense of that reality that is relegated to the realm of mystery for Weil—God. However, training in these pedagogical tools does result in the capacity for comprehending the depth of this mystery, and is indeed foundational for our recognition of it. Weil says that it is apt only "when the most logical and rigorous use of the intelligence leads to an impasse, to a contradiction which is inescapable."¹⁶³

Contradiction's use in Weil's pedagogical framework is therefore extremely important. In addition to its connection to attention in terms of means, it is also a result or end of attention. Weil states, "contradiction is not conceived by the mind without an effort on the part of the attention. For without this effort we conceive one of the contraries, or else the other, but not the two together, and above all not the two together

¹⁶⁰ See discussion on page 45 above.

¹⁶¹ *NI* 34.

¹⁶² *N2*, 386.

¹⁶³ *FLN*, 181.

in the character of the contradictories.”¹⁶⁴ The discipline and practice of attention therefore leads to the proper labeling and use of contradiction as outlined here. The presence of these two terms in conjunction with Weil’s thematization of basic pedagogy, however, should not distract us from her view to their ultimate use in conjunction with the contemplation of God. As Morgan states, “contradictions pervade all of reality,” though “our task is not to resolve or eliminate them, ‘because in this world man cannot release himself from contradictions, he can only make good use of them.’”¹⁶⁵ Weil understands contradiction’s attentive use as something that can assist one in emerging from a given point of view¹⁶⁶ and as helpful for making sense of transcendent paradoxes through immanent ones. In this way, her use of contradiction—the awareness of and attention to the paradoxes of immanent reality—has a direct relationship to the next pedagogic tool, analogy—making connections between the higher planes of immanent reality and transcendent reality.

Analogy

Related to the tool of contradiction is analogy. In many senses, Weil’s use of analogy to understand contraries relates to Springsted’s understanding of the second level of Weilian contradiction—incommensuration. Just as incommensuration denotes an inability to mathematically compare (measure) two identities, so is Weil’s analogical use most often grounded in the understanding of mathematics, and reconciling incomparables. Along with Descartes, Weil maintains that analogy is the tool most

¹⁶⁴ *N2*, 387.

¹⁶⁵ Vance G. Morgan, “Simone Weil and the Divine Poetry of Mathematics” in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* eds. Eric O Springsted and E Jane Doering (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 110. [quoting Weil, *Science Necessity and the Love of God*, 60]

¹⁶⁶ Weil, *LP* trans. Aruther Wills, as quoted by Springsted, “Contradiction,” 15.

suitied for teaching physics: “*Educational method: Physics taught solely by analogy* (Descartes) ex. Light—1. Analogy with *projectile*... 2. Objections to the analogy...3. Analogy with waves....”¹⁶⁷ Elsewhere she continues to maintain analogy’s connection to mathematics by making a distinction between it and resemblance (which isn’t connected to mathematics). “In its proper sense, ‘analogy’ is a mathematical relationship, a proportion.”¹⁶⁸ As she discusses the mathematical or scientific uses of analogy to understand things/relationships we don’t know through things/relationships that we do, analogy develops into a more broadly understood concept in her pedagogical repertoire. Generalizing from its use for scientific concepts, she states, “One cannot proceed from what is concrete to what is abstract. As a result, one looks to see if it isn’t possible, through analogy, to find another effect which has another cause, but which is of such a kind that the relationship of cause to effect is identical.... The real way of gaining knowledge about nature is to try to find analogies, so that the things which we do not bring about will appear as simple as those which we do.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, Weil opens the possibility for linking a scientific/mathematical understanding of analogy to its use in understanding other incommensurables—even those that are divine.

In addition to applying the tool of analogy to the understanding of incommensurable, transcendent truths, Weil also uses the tool of analogy to understand important features of her philosophy of education. Both memory and concreteness can be understood through application of analogy, as Weil does in points throughout her *Lectures*. Early in Weil’s lecture on the materialist position, she states the importance of

¹⁶⁷ *FLN*, 4.

¹⁶⁸ *LP*, 106.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

analogy in the awareness of human identity. This discussion is in the context of her examination of those things which are in the “external world” and that are in the foreground of the conscious apprehension of one’s imagination.¹⁷⁰ Weil’s maintenance of individual identity here is the sixth feature of the external world given through the imagination. This is related to her support for the needs and obligations in souls that are concretely-experienced, as stated in the previous section on her philosophy of education. The use of analogy is important insofar as it provides one with awareness of the individuality of other human beings, and (through that awareness) an idea of the separateness of other things. Weil states, “we think of the individual separateness of things in analogy with the individuality of other human beings to whom we ascribe a soul in analogy with ourselves.”¹⁷¹ This use of analogy is pedagogically significant in that it underscores the importance of the tool for coming to understand that Weil’s intended subject for pedagogic practice is the concrete person. Here Weil takes up the case of individual separateness and reasons from there to an understanding of the separateness of things. This reinforces our previous examination of the importance of the concreteness of a person, and shows that this feature can be used in conjunction with the pedagogic tool of analogy for further understanding.

Analogy is also useful, particularly for Weil’s understanding of an individual’s experience of self through memory. This use also connects analogy to her philosophy of education. Weil demonstrates use of the analogical tool in memory in her discussion of time as it relates to an understanding of the mind. She says, “one connects what one was

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 48-49.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 52.

to what one is by a succession of necessities; but since one cannot think of oneself as an object, one has to represent yesterday's self to oneself in analogy with that of today. Amnesia does not result in one's losing consciousness of the "I." One can lose consciousness of oneself in so far as one is an object, but not in so far as one is a subject."¹⁷² In other words, one is able to reconcile the seeming incommensuration of oneself from one day to the next by means of an analogy of existence. Memory, via analogy, connects the awareness of oneself as an object ("one knows that one has a name, a position in society, etc."¹⁷³) and oneself as a subject ("at such moments one fills the world"¹⁷⁴). Therefore, memory is again underscored as an essential component of pedagogy (the normal state is the awareness of subjectivity and objectivity functioning together), and also a feature that is attained by means of one of Weil's central pedagogical tools, analogy.

Myth

Weil's use of myth in her pedagogy is related, once again, to her use of contradiction and analogy. While analogy is mathematically based, aiding in understanding those things that are beyond understanding through mathematical truths, myths are story based, yet still allowing for an analogous relationship that leads to understanding. In a brief and striking statement to an editor, Weil states her pedagogic purpose for the explication of myths. She states:

I wondered, anxiously, how I could take upon myself to write within the required limits, for obviously it was a question of giving you the most proper prose of which I am capable. Luckily I remembered an old project

¹⁷² Ibid., 100.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

that which is very close to my heart; that of making the masterpieces of Greek poetry (which I passionately love) available to the masses. Since last year I have felt that great Greek poetry would be a hundred times closer to the people if it could be known by them, than classical or modern French literature could ever be. I have begun with 'Antigone'. If I have succeeded in my intention for this work, it ought to interest and touch everyone from the factory director down to the lowest manual labourer, it ought to provide them all with complete access without the least impression of condescension or of any arrangements having been made to bring the work within their reach. It is thus that I understand popularization. But I am in ignorance as to whether I have succeeded."¹⁷⁵

We notice that in this extended quote, Weil's desire is to bring the Greek myths closer to the proletariat because of her contention that these texts are important in understanding the greater divine realities to which they point. Weil's use of *Antigone* elsewhere in her works, *La Source Greque* or *Les Intuitions Pré-chrétiennes*, demonstrates this deep, divine significance of the play. In other words, by promoting the understanding of this foundational myth, Weil intends to bring to light its analogy to the Christian tradition.

In addition to using her own story-telling to make accessible ancient Greek story-telling, Weil also wants to teach the grounding of these myths. That this grounding flies in the face of a linear understanding of time is of little concern. She says in her essay "Prometheus," "Is it not an extremely powerful thing to be able to say this to all the unbelievers: without the haunting of the Passion, this Greek civilization, from which you draw all your thoughts without exception, would never have existed?' There are all sorts of arguments against such a conception of history, but as soon as one enters into this one, it appears to be of such a crying truth that one can never abandon it."¹⁷⁶ Leaving aside, as

¹⁷⁵ Weil, "Antigone" p. 18-23 in *Intimations* 18-19. [This essay originally published in *SG*, p. 57-63]

¹⁷⁶ Weil, "Prometheus" p. 60-73 in *Intimations*, 71. [This essay originally published in *IPC* p. 93-108]

she does, the question of how this approach to ancient Greek thought engages the neo-platonic or Christian Platonist tradition, let us instead focus on how her imaginative synthesis of founding myths can function in pedagogic use. Her statement in the essay “Prometheus” demonstrates her concern for the religious basis for education (as seen in her continual emphasis on the notion of attention as prayer, and as the basis for pedagogy), as well as her belief in the analogous relationship between compelling stories. More than this analogy between ancient Greek myths and those from the Christian tradition, Weil emphasizes the power of these myths to lead one to the foundational (or, to remain consistent with Weil’s verticality, “higher”) truths on which they are based.

In her essay, “God’s Quest for Man,” we see her fluid and synthetic use of a variety of myths, shaping them for her educative purpose. Especially striking in this essay is the diverse origins of the myths she uses to convey a singular message—that of God’s pursuit of man, instead of its converse: man’s search for God. She begins by mentioning the gospels’ penchant for parables with this fundamental orientation, and goes on to explicate a myth by Homer, one of Scottish folk origin, Sophocles’ *Electra*, and the biblical account of the Passion.¹⁷⁷ The importance of this diversity (from classical and sacred to popular and traditional) lies in Weil’s desire to compel readers through stories that are or become familiar to their own experiences. Because of this purpose, we can also see why Weil would use these myths as carriers for the other pedagogical tools as seen above, especially analogy.

Notice in the following explanatory statement her fluidity in moving between pedagogical tools and the myths that found them. Weil says, “There are in this myth two

¹⁷⁷ Weil, “God’s Quest for Man” p. 1-10 in *Intimations*, 1-10. [This essay originally published in *IPC* p. 9-21]

successive acts of violence to which God subjects the soul, one which is pure violence, another to which its salvation depends. These two moments are found also in the myth of the *Phaedrus* and in that of the Cave. They have an analogy in the parable in the Gospels concerning the wedding banquet....They have an analogy in the opposition between the ‘called’ and the ‘Elect’, and also in the parable of the virgins who go out together....”¹⁷⁸

In other words, in Weil’s hands the myths remain stories out of which one lives but become sites for other pedagogic practices in her hope for meeting the needs of the soul.

Summary

Our investigation throughout this chapter has brought to light Weil’s pedagogic emphasis on concrete application, attention and memory. We have also shown how these three components of her philosophy of education work in conjunction with several tools that Weil uses in her educational practice—contradiction, analogy and myth. Having fleshed out these concepts of Weil’s *communal* practice of education (inside the classroom), we can turn now to a treatment of Weil’s self-directed pedagogic practice as demonstrated in her *Notebooks*. By seeing in what way these themes carry over, we will ascertain more fully the practical and pedagogic connection between Weil and the Stoic practice that she so admires.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 4.

Chapter 4: Simone Weil and auto-philosophical therapy of soul

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we analyzed Weil's pedagogic tools in the context of her public pedagogical theory and practice as teacher. The purpose of this section will be to focus on contradiction specifically in the *Notebooks* as a paradigmatic example of Weil's practice of self-directed pedagogy. In this regard, this section should be seen as a means by which to close gap between Weil's formal pedagogic practice (as outlined in the section immediately preceding) and her personal (auto-philosophical) engagement with the ancient Greek tradition of philosophy as a way of life. This chapter will begin by positioning Weil's *Notebooks*, both historically and philosophically. Weil's *First and Last Notebooks* (as the final published volume of her entire collection of *Notebooks*, published earlier as a two volume set) were written during the pre-war years,¹⁷⁹ and then in New York and London, immediately preceding her death.¹⁸⁰ Situated as they are over such a broad span, *First and Last Notebooks* positions us to examine Weil's personal philosophical practice in various social climates and life situations. I will argue, contrary to those who attempt to see them only as the germ for a more cogent, complete work that Weil didn't live long enough to realize,¹⁸¹ that these notebooks are also purposefully written for Weil's own personal edification. In doing so, I will depend on the prior reading of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* as is found in *The Inner Citadel*. There, Hadot

¹⁷⁹ According to the editor of *First and Last Notebooks*, Richard Rees, this volume is assumed to have been written between the years 1933 and 1939, intermittently (Rees, Introduction to *First and Last Notebooks* [London: Oxford University Press, 1970], vii).

¹⁸⁰ These two notebooks were composed in 1942 and 1943.

¹⁸¹ For instance, in Anderson and Rees.

shows the possibility of textual cohesion by means of a superficially diverse philosophical discipline or therapy of the soul. In addition, we will examine in what way Weil's *Notebooks* shows the development of her pedagogic understanding—especially the use of contradiction and attention, practices we underscored in the previous chapter. There, as here, Weil's ancient and pedagogic connections come especially to the surface in passages that express understanding of the soul and are aimed to better position Weil in relation to the transcendent.

In the beginning of her final notebook written in London, Weil states, “the proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting.”¹⁸² In this statement, Weil makes sense of the kind of practice that she advocates as pedagogic exercise: fixed waiting (attention) on inherent contradictions in human reality—insoluble problems. As I will argue, this is the practice in which she engages throughout these notebooks, but in varying forms. Before the war, this pedagogic discipline is manifest in a markedly personal, therapeutic way—characterized by personal interjections for the betterment of her soul, but also including the beginnings of her treatment of contradiction.¹⁸³ The practice becomes more pointedly philosophical in the significantly longer New York notebook where she develops her notion of contradiction as mystery, and also engages in rationalization for personally held beliefs.¹⁸⁴ The final London notebook seems to be more self-consciously reflective in its

¹⁸² *FLN*, 335.

¹⁸³ Weil's use of pronouns is significant here; her predominant use of “I, me, my” is indicative of her developing understanding of her notebooks as “making clear to oneself.” This is strikingly evident on page 11.

¹⁸⁴ See for instance the treatment of her wrestling with the notion of baptism, beginning on page 82 below.

contradictory musings, again bringing together her knowledge of Eastern philosophy, the ancient Western tradition, and Christianity, indicating both of her latest and most developed thought, but also of her desire to achieve a measure of synthesis among disparate traditions. This section will conclude with a summary of the argument: how Weil's work in her *Notebooks* functions in ways similar to that of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and in terms of similar philosophical themes. This pedagogic similarity gives weight to my claim that her *Notebooks* are an example of productive philosophic therapy of the soul, and also a means for subsequent readers' practice of therapy of the soul. This latter aim demands the reader's own capacity to reflect upon her pregnant contradictions and attempts at mediation.

Positioning the Notebooks

Many commentators on *First and Last Notebooks*, including the editor/translator of the first English version, suggest that the main purpose of Weil's notebooks in general, including the volume presently under consideration, was for publication, after editing, at a later date. Rees is so bold as to say this is their *obvious* purpose. "It is obvious that the notes were mostly written with a view to future use in books, though some of them are in a kind of intellectual shorthand that she would have had to expand."¹⁸⁵ Anderson agrees in his statement concerning the *Notebooks*, "her notes do not represent final judgments: they consist of ideas, stories, quotations etc. which are in the nature of 'food for thought', to be chewed and ingested at a later time of leisure."¹⁸⁶ These statements stand for a tradition of Weilian interpretation that ascribes a future functional utility to the *Notebooks*

¹⁸⁵ Richard Rees, "Introduction" to Simone Weil's *First and Last Notebooks* trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), vii.

¹⁸⁶ David Anderson, *Simone Weil* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1971), 99.

to the exclusion of recognizing their immediate personal value to Weil *as they were*.¹⁸⁷

Without rejecting the fact that there is indeed ample evidence that much contained within Weil's *Notebooks* could have been used as notes for a (or, better, several) later book(s), this chapter will take a different approach. In the first place, it appropriates TS Eliot's hermeneutical insight that we should read Weil with her youth and precociousness in mind, as she presents herself. He says, "the intellect, especially when bent upon such problems as those which harassed Simone Weil, can come to maturity only slowly; and we must not forget that Simone Weil died at the age of thirty-three. [...] she had a very great soul to grow up to; and we should not criticize her philosophy at thirty-three as if it were that of a person twenty or thirty years older."¹⁸⁸ While her work would have undoubtedly become more sophisticated as she lived, the contention of this chapter is that the philosophical sophistication demonstrated in her *First and Last Notebooks* indicates more than appears at first sight. It is a sophistication tied to her engagement of the Stoic tradition of *cura sui* as seen in the example of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*; this framing of her notebooks gives them pedagogical and personal cohesion, even while they are thematically diffuse.

We will examine the *Notebooks* in their witness to a personal pedagogy or a philosophical care of the self. We will leave aside readings of these *Notebooks* as incomplete doctrine, lecture notes and book/article germination and focus instead on their

¹⁸⁷ TS Eliot comes close to this critique as well in his introduction to Weil's *Need for Roots* when he states that "[*Need for Roots*] is, I think, among those works of hers already published, the one which approximates most closely to the form in which she might herself have chosen to release it." (x) This statement implies, like the rest, that had she had more time to work on her notebooks, she would have put them in better order to be published ("released"). TS Eliot in "Preface" to Simone Weil's *NR* trans. AF Willis (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

¹⁸⁸ TS Eliot, vii.

personal value to Weil, from the beginning of her philosophical career until her early death.

The features of the *First and Last Notebooks* as personal pedagogy that we will note here fall predominantly into categories consistent with those of the previous three chapters. This is to say, as references to Weil's personal background (chapter 1), her love of ancient philosophy (chapter 2) and her philosophy of education (chapter 3) manifest themselves in this text, we will note them as particular instances of her personal, pedagogic interaction. The *Notebooks* contain evidences of many of the features (especially p. 4 of *FLN* and Weil's list of the temptations to be read daily) that we have discovered in the ancient tradition as exemplified in Marcus Aurelius and the Stoic school.

Weil's First and Last Notebooks as personal pedagogy

Pre-War Notebook:

At a mere 62 pages, Weil's "Pre-War Notebook" is quite short in comparison to her 270 page New York Notebook, immediately following in this volume. However, she composed it over a much greater length of time,¹⁸⁹ allowing us as readers an important and personal glimpse of her development in the years following her formal schooling and throughout her first years of teaching. This is quite significant as we examine her personal pedagogy in relation to her philosophy of education. As a basis for our later, more in-depth, examination of the personal pedagogic value of Weil's *First and Last Notebooks*, the function of this section will lie mainly in ascertaining the connection between this text, the "Pre-War Notebook" and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, as treated in the work of Pierre Hadot. This particular notebook's visual orientation aids greatly in

¹⁸⁹ See note 179 above.

this type of engagement. Here she often adds marginalia, crosses out paragraphs, and boxes certain passages, providing us a spatially significant text. Because of this uniqueness, we will focus on the significance of this spatiality for ascertaining Weil's personal connection to the text, leaving the thematic significance of her work for her later, New York and London, notebooks.

Weil's self-dialogue

Weil's frequent asides are the most important indication of her self-directed interest in writing. Weil's first instance of this type of aside occurs in a marginal note early on the first page. She says, "Value of suffering—I believe in the value of suffering, so long as one makes every [legitimate] effort to escape it."¹⁹⁰ There are a number of elements to be noted here. None are conclusive, considered on their own. But, together Weil's use of the personal pronoun, the comment's topical disjunction with the subject that had been developing immediately prior to these remarks and that continues to develop after them, and the comments' presence in a marginal notation indicate an instance of personal pedagogy. It is clearly an aside, both spatially and thematically, since the section immediately surrounding this quote (in the main body of the text) indicate her preferred method for teaching physics (analogy), and its inherent difficulties (certain transitions—plane to solid, rest to motion etc.).¹⁹¹

This statement about her personal stance toward suffering does, however, inform our reading of the next page, where Weil creates a "List of temptations (to be read every morning)." These temptations, along with suggested practices to counteract them, can be

¹⁹⁰ *FLN*, 3.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

read by later readers as commands, though this exclusive reading would miss the high level of self-conscious reflection that Weil demonstrates here. She notes which temptation she struggles with most pointedly (that of idleness), and lists several others that recur as themes throughout her notebooks and elsewhere in her texts. Temptations such as “temptation of the inner life,” which deal with the external difficulties that confront her as opposed to those “imaginary in her feelings,” remain Weil’s battle throughout her texts.

In her self command to “read every morning” the list of temptations that she wrote, Weil’s practice is slightly different from that of Marcus, who wrote for writing’s sake—intending not to read again. However, there are significant similarities in the two philosophers’ notebooks in terms of their similarly therapeutic orientation. Weil’s self-diagnosis of her most troubling temptations and self-prescribed cure of reading them every morning is very close to Hadot’s understanding of Marcus’ personal use of his own *Meditations*. Weil writes here what she anticipates will be most helpful for her development of soul, her care of self, both at her present time of writing, and also for purposes of re-reading. Apparently, not only the bodily action of inscribing, but also the mnemonic presence of the re-read text on the page and in one’s memory functioned as Weil’s medicine.

Another instance of a significant aside occurs just a few pages later, where Weil again reflects on her own deficiencies and what she can do to correct them. She says,

Two internal obstacles to be overcome—Cowardice before the flight of time (mania for putting things off—idleness...) Illusion of time, of itself, will bring me courage and energy... In fact, it is usually the contrary (sleeplessness). Say to yourself: And suppose I should remain *always* what I am at this moment? ...*Never* put something off indefinitely, but only to a definitely fixed time. Try to do this even when it is impossible

(headaches...). Exercises: decide to do something, no matter what, and do it *exactly* at a certain time.¹⁹²

Weil continues this self-dialogue for most of the page, indicating to herself what “one must” do in general, and then commanding herself to do it through particular action. For instance, she states, “one must develop a habit. Training.[...] Begin the training with small things, those for which inspiration is useless. Think of V.S... *Every day*, do 2 or 3 things of no interest at some definitely appointed time.”¹⁹³ Again, as a corrective for the self-discovered deficiency of her “cowardice before the flight of time” and “illusion that time will bring more courage and energy,” she prescribes particular action, suited to her particular situation. While these thoughts can be translated to the lives of other readers, Weil was writing about her own life with herself. The self-dialogue which she engages here is even more important in view of the crossed-out passage on the next page.

In a telling paragraph which the editor notes: “[*what follows is crossed out in ink*],”¹⁹⁴ we can ascertain why Weil is left to self-dialogue instead of dialogue with another as preferred means of care-of-self; this forceful statement discloses both her view of herself and the importance of friendship.

Since you need the inspiration of friendship, you must think about the unknown friend.... Learn to be alone, if only so as to be worthy of true friendship.... Learn to be alone serenely and joyfully. Otherwise, you must despise yourself.... Reflect that if you were to die now it would be in an unsatisfied state. What a disgrace! It is good that X should not be a real friend for you. You don't deserve that he should be.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Ibid., 11.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Even as she dismisses her attachment to friends that she has had in the past by saying that she is not worthy of them, by writing Weil is attempting to bring about a change within herself that makes her content with solitude, and therefore deserving of friendship again.¹⁹⁶ Seen alongside the previous two statements of commands-to-self, we notice again her attempt to care for self, noting her deficiency and her proposed solution for it. As she states her preference here for forgoing friendship for the sake of friendship, we see this exercise as a means to the end of appreciating herself as a subject—underscoring the notion of care for self. Only a subject is worthy of friendship. She is not yet a subject in her present “friendships.” Therefore, she flees present “friendship” in order to become a full subject. That is, she notes to herself what is lacking and how it can be addressed.

The fact that the editor notes this particular paragraph was crossed out in ink is also significant. It addresses a very personal aspect of Weil’s life—that of her most meaningful friendships. That it was crossed out, however, tells us that while some of her statements were meant to be re-read (the temptations), this one was not. This raises the possibility that the importance of this passage was in the writing itself, providing a strong link to the practice of Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations*, it will be recalled, were meant specifically for the time they were written.

The link between self and friendship in Weil is further clarified by a statement later, “it is a fault if one wants to be understood before having made a thing clear to

¹⁹⁶ Not only does this statement indicate Weil’s belief that to be a friend to others, one must be a friend to oneself, but also gives us a glimpse into her use of paradox. Here she commands herself to withdraw from the goal in order to attain the goal. This principle is repeated in Weil’s understanding of Hinduism found later in *FLN*: “As the Hindus perceived, the great difficulty in seeking for God is that we have him within us, at the centre of ourselves. How can I approach myself? Every step I take leads me away from myself. That is why we cannot search for God” (261).

oneself—it is cultivating pleasures, and undeserved ones, in friendship—it is something even more corrupting than love. You would sell your soul for friendship....”¹⁹⁷ Here we see one of the first explicit indications of Weil’s understanding her notebooks as making something “clear to oneself,” as will be important in our examination of her last *Notebooks*. She still struggles here, though in a less explicitly personal way, with her desire for friendship, though in her positive suggestion to attempt to make things clear to herself as a primary goal shows an important development. Her struggle with friendship will continue to be important in this notebook, though in increasingly abstracted ways.

She says later, “learn to reject friendship, or rather the dream of friendship.[...] Friendship ought not to be the cure for sorrows of loneliness but to double its joys. Friendship is not to be sought for, dreamed about, longed for, but exercised (it is a virtue). Get rid of all this impure and muddy froth of sentiment.... Schluss!”¹⁹⁸ Note here that Weil is attempting to break herself of looking externally for the cure of self in friendship. When one is contented in one’s loneliness, seeking internally the necessary care-of-self, then one can receive friendship as a gift, thereby increasing one’s joy.

Weil’s beginning engagement with contradiction

Beyond her growing awareness of her notebooks’ function as self-dialogue and all its attendant benefits, Weil also demonstrates in the “Pre-War Notebook” the beginning of her understanding of contradiction as a significant pedagogic tool. As before in our examination of Weil’s self-directed asides, this pedagogic understanding of contradiction has important visual dimensions in this early notebook. They center mainly on her

¹⁹⁷ *FLN*, 37.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

fascination with the lever. Since she states later that contradiction is a lever,¹⁹⁹ her use of it here in relation to ships and boats has added pedagogic significance. She states,

Tool: a *balance* between man and the universe.... ‘the forces of nature infinitely surpass...’ So therefore? And yet the sailor in his boat balances *equally* against the infinite forces of the ocean. (Remember that the boat is a lever.) At every moment the helmsman—by the weak, but *directed*, power of his muscles on tiller and oar—maintains an equilibrium with that enormous mass of air and water.²⁰⁰

It is this notion of equilibrium that provides the link between boat, lever and contradiction. Her understanding of the mechanics of sailing²⁰¹ makes the boat an obvious entry point into the symbolic significance that she will later give to contradiction—though they are both based on the simple tool of the lever. She also has inclinations of the importance of the lever imagery in religious discourse. Weil quotes the poem by Fortunatus of Ravenna in the margin of her musings on the importance of equilibrium and lever that is “not very clear yet.”²⁰² The poem reads, “Beata cujus bracchiis//Pretium pependit saeculi, //Stratera facta corporis//Tulit quae praedam Tartari.”²⁰³

Further suggesting her fascination with the symbol of the lever and its growing significance as a symbol for her later pedagogic and religious treatment is the visual illustration on the cover of the “Pre-War Notebook.” Here she models what she quotes in Greek, “Δός που στώ και κόσμου κωησω...” and then further clarifies: “*the point of*

¹⁹⁹ *FLN*, 131 and 134.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰¹ Cf. *FLN* pp. 33-34.

²⁰² *FLN*, 50.

²⁰³ *Ibid.* “Blessed tree, on whose branches hung the ransom of the world! Thou wert made a balance for that body, and bore away the prey of hell.”

*leverage: that essential idea of equilibrium....*²⁰⁴ Indeed, her later treatment of contradiction as a lever of transcendence was rooted both in her fascination with Greek thought, but also in her desire for connection with non-academic life (her recurring sailing imagery). In this one instance, therefore, we see the germ of connections between her philosophical training and situated pedagogic emphases, which will further develop in her later notebooks.

New York Notebook:

In the New York notebook, the long middle of her *First and Last Notebooks*, Weil engages in care of self analogous to that of Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations*, though it is more difficult to pinpoint. As a means to finding instances of this self-directed discourse and its pedagogic significance, we will pay attention to three themes, already brought to the fore in earlier chapters. As the first chapter focused on Weil's life and how it related to her practice, so will the instances in this first section draw on her immediate context and influences, paying attention to how her public discussions are systematically worked out through her self-talk in her notebooks. The foremost of these is her treatment of baptism, which recurs constantly in this notebook and mirrors her continuing conversation about it with Father Perrin.²⁰⁵ Second, we will treat Weil's implicit and explicit engagement with the Stoic tradition. Here we will pay attention to Stoic themes, figures and practices, as they are manifest in the notebook—especially as they illuminate her self-conscious engagement in the similar care-of-self practice. Lastly,

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 25. "give me a point of leverage and I will move the world."

²⁰⁵ Especially in her "Letter to a Priest" where we find Weil's answer for why she chooses against her own baptism into the Catholic Church. As helpful as this letter is in stating Weil's position, contra Perrin, it is important to note that it is merely one of the last in a string of letters that carries on this important battle between the two of them. Indeed, the intervening years, when this notebook was written, have surely done much to solidify Weil's position on the matter, as evidenced through the musings in the present text.

we will engage her pedagogic method, as outlined in Chapter three by examining her discussion and use of contradiction. Since we found this tool to be pedagogically important within her formal pedagogic settings, its use here in her personal journal will be especially telling of her continuing self-pedagogy as a particular inflection of her own care-of-self.

Making clear to oneself: Weil' personal engagement with baptism

One indication of Weil's continued use of her notebooks as a means of making her thoughts clear to herself (as she suggested in her Pre-War notebook) is her recurring wrestling with topics that she was engaged with in her other, public, discourse. Here we will compare texts like Weil's "Letter to a Priest" to her notebooks to ascertain the ways in which she used the notebooks to work out her views on certain issues (especially baptism). Rees states in his introduction that Weil's development in the time between the first Pre-War Notebook and the war-time New York Notebook (written three years later) is significant, doubtless due in large part to the mystical conversion experience she describes in a piece entitled "prologue."²⁰⁶ Interestingly, this experience is found, nearly word for word, in two places in the work of Simone Weil. While it suggests the importance of re-writing for remembering, it also suggests the importance of this conversion experience for her future work. Indeed, Weil's last notebooks (both New York and London) are filled with passages attempting to reconcile her newly found faith and her long held love of Greek thought.

²⁰⁶ Rees states, "Her mystical experience in 1938 did nothing to lessen her practical concern, but if anything intensified it; and the reader will be able to judge for himself by comparing the pre-war notebook with the later ones, how far this experience modified her attitude to the problem." (Introduction, *FLN*, ix)

She speaks briefly of her personal history in a note on obedience to God, marveling at her past atheism and present devotion to God.

In reality, since God exists, even my disobedience is without importance; but I only know this when I am in obedience. As soon as I disobey, my disobedience acquires an illusory importance, which there are only two ways of effacing—either by a return to obedience through anguish and the pain of detaching my desires, or through lying to myself. [...] In order to obey God, one must receive his commands. How did it happen that I received them in adolescence, while I was professing atheism? To believe that the desire for good is always fulfilled—that is faith, and whoever has it is not an atheist.²⁰⁷

This quote is important in that it shows Weil's struggle not only with how she is to live in the future, but also how she is to understand her past in terms of the present grace that she has received. It also begins to explain her sympathy for the good she finds in Greek mythology and her unwillingness to separate herself from these “non-Christians” by means of official entry into the visible Church through baptism.

Before the publication of her notebooks, Weil's main treatment of her difficulty with baptism occurred in her letters to and discussions with Father Perrin. Though we do not have transcripts of their discussions, her two letters devoted to the theme give us an idea of her worked through stance on her own baptism. She says regarding the sacraments in general (and baptism in particular):

when I think of the act by which I should enter the Church as something concrete, which might happen quite soon, nothing gives me more pain than the idea of separating myself from the immense and unfortunate multitude of unbelievers. [...] There are some human beings for whom such a separation has not serious disadvantages, because they are already separated from ordinary folk by their natural purity of soul. As for me, on the contrary...²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ *FLN*, 137.

²⁰⁸ *WG*, 48.

Hence, in her notebooks, we find much more justification for her “Christianization” of unbelievers (from pre-Christian to folk cultures) than justification of herself for the Church. This is evident especially in the sacrament of baptism. While she treats baptism as something of paramount importance for the believer (a statement that recurs in her letters to Father Perrin), she also attempts to view the unbeliever’s religious practices as synonymous with baptism. This is strikingly evident in her treatment of Greek mythology. She uses the comparison in the gospels between water and fire. “Cf. The word of John the Baptist. He shall baptize in the Spirit and in fire. This was the baptism that Demeter and Isis gave to their nurslings, their adopted children. Was it a sacrifice, or simply a baptism?”²⁰⁹ Taking the imagery of fire as it relates to baptism to its fullest extent, Weil is able to draw out, for her personal reflection, the implications of the narrow definition to which the Church subscribes. Though she is validating the practice of baptism as broadly conceived (rather, how *she* conceives it broadly), she also critiques the narrow interpretation of the church and therefore justifies her desire to be disentangled from its narrow conception and the implied narrow group of adherents.

Of course, this further confuses her personal stance against baptism until a statement late in her New York Notebook. “Today, if a son of Jewish or atheist parents is baptized, this means that he is joining a social group, namely the Church, in the same way that by holding a political party’s card he becomes a member of the party. This is usurpation.”²¹⁰ Her fear of the political/national bleeding into the life of the church is

²⁰⁹ *FLN*, 100.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

also her condemnation of Protestantism as it relates to the Jewish religion in its national leanings.

And the Romans did want to adopt the Jewish religion. But a national religion cannot pass from one people to another like a suit of clothes. That is why the Romans chose the non-national form of the Jewish religion, the Christian form. The Jewish religion, with an addendum transferring the privilege of Israel to baptized Gentiles, made the perfectly appropriate religion for the Roman empire.... For Protestants, who no longer have the Church, religion has become to a great extent national. Hence the revived importance of the Old Testament.²¹¹

In these statements concerning baptism, we find Weil making her own views clear to herself; by integrating her religious, political and social views she situates herself clearly in relation to the implicit criticisms from Father Perrin. Simone Pétrement says of her time in New York that Simone Weil was “still trying to find out whether or not her ideas were compatible with belonging to the Church. With this in mind, she had a number of meetings with theologians.”²¹² In other words, the statements within her New York notebook about baptism were her self-dialogue which occurred at the same time as her dialogue with American theologians and Father Perrin in her effort to make her thoughts clear to herself.

Writing her life as a farmer

Weil’s interaction with the theme of baptism is not the only indication of her writing herself into her notebooks, i.e., her using the notebooks to work out beliefs tied to her life experiences. In the New York notebook, though not as timely as discussions on baptism, Weil treated and theologized agricultural life—a theme significant because of its connection to her first-hand experience.

²¹¹ Ibid., 215-216.

²¹² Pétrement, 478-479.

Weil also indicates that her audience in passages relating to agricultural themes includes herself through her pronoun usage. While occasionally slipping into third person plural (they/them), she often uses the first person plural (we/us), indicating her inclusion in the address. This is especially telling in her proposal for a personalized yearly liturgical calendar for each of several different specialized groups of people—so they could relate better to the gospel message as it was designed specifically for them (as a member of a particular group).²¹³ Her pastoral discourse here mirrors that of the apostle Paul's discussion of the Lord's Supper though it is important to our discussion here in that Weil's liturgy is based directly on her life experiences.

Though it would seem this enterprise is entirely outwardly focused, it is clear from her language and her vocational background that she occasionally includes herself in her directed addresses. For instance, as she addresses wheat farmers, and then again those who tend vineyards—she uses the telling pronoun “we,” indicating that she also finds these particular liturgical calendar proposals personally meaningful, perhaps on account of her familiarity with agricultural work on Thibon's farm in France (from 1941-1942—immediately before she left for New York). Of course, with Weil's sojourn on a farm is only one context. One also notices the symbolic context of the Eucharist (as it incorporates both bread from the wheat farmers and wine from the vineyard tenders).

In a directive statement to farmers and theologians, Weil says,

There ought to be a spiritual almanac for peasants, with a theme for meditation all the year round. Seed-time—when the sower's seed falls on stones, or on barren ground, or on good ground. That is to say, God gives the totality of good to everyone at every moment, but we only receive what we choose. Plough the soul as one ploughs the earth to prepare it for the seed. Labour the soil of oneself.... As God to kill and bury us

²¹³ *FLN*, 264-266.

spiritually while we are in this world. Burial in total renunciation and silence.²¹⁴

In familiar pedagogic mode, however, Weil slips out of this corporate engagement and takes the role of external director: “explain to them that work does literally consume and burn up the flesh, and therefore in a sense their own flesh becomes Christ’s flesh. By eating and digesting it Christ’s flesh becomes their flesh. The cycle is completed.”²¹⁵

Indeed, the oscillation between farmhand and teacher marked in her notebook matched that of her personal life as well. She says in a letter to her parents from Thibon’s farm, “When we’re together, we could cultivate some vegetables on a piece of land, with Thibon’s help and advice (one can find uncultivated land for nothing), I could work now and then for the neighbors, and perhaps I could also sometimes use my pedagogic abilities for gifts in kind.”²¹⁶

Weil’s treatment of baptism and agricultural labour in her New York notebook indicate her timely engagement with issues that directly confronted her. This indicates her practice of using her own experience as a repository of symbols to be expolred for hidden meaning via subsequent reflection. In this sense, her *Notebooks* function as the location for this reflection. Of course, Weil’s personal use of her notebooks did not end with connecting her immediate life experiences, but extended also to her intellectual development, as we will see in the following section.

²¹⁴ Weil, *FLN*, 264.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 265.

²¹⁶ As quoted in Petrément, 429.

Instances of Stoic practice and themes in New York Notebook

In addition to her statements that show a direct link to her personal context, whether intellectual, spiritual or physical, Weil also provides several clues regarding her interest in ancient philosophy—many directly referencing pedagogic practices seen in Marcus Aurelius. As in the Pre-War Notebook, these are sometimes seen as personal interjections (asides) or self-direction. The connection to Stoic self-therapy confirms our supposition that, while in the process of writing, Weil was engaging as much in personally directed therapy as creating notes for future books.

Weil's sequence of personal interjections testifies to her self-application of the truths that she was proclaiming. The most recurring of these interjections is taken from Jesus' words in the gospels: "πάτερ τούτο δός έμοί."²¹⁷ The statement also recurs in French, "Father, in the name of Christ grant me this,"²¹⁸ and on the next page, "Father, in the name of Christ grant me all this in reality."²¹⁹ She also says at one point: "I would like to achieve this without effort,"²²⁰ similar to her use of the Greek, but with a difference in tone. This frequent refrain indicates Weil's use of her text as important for her self-development. Her notebooks exist not only in order to write a text for others (as so many have stated), but also for herself. Through writing she hopes to inscribe these thoughts and practices onto herself. Just as Marcus Aurelius used the act of writing as the first step in a process of inner transformation in his *Meditations*, so also does Weil engage in self-conscious and self-reflective practice for her own care-of-self.

²¹⁷ Though it is not always in exactly the same formulation, it can be found in Greek (in various wordings) in *FLN*, 174, 136, and 310.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

The ancient practice of care-of-self as mediated by subsequent Christian experience is even more transparent in Weil's reading plan, directly following her self-command: "One should make a list of the things which have to be obtained by human means and not asked from God..."²²¹ The quote from Jacopone de Todi that directly follows reinforces this efficacious work of human means, as does the reading list itself. Weil writes, "Mirror of simple souls:" "French mysticism of the 14th Century. Ruysbroek. *The sparkling stone*, ch. viii *Sacrum commercium. Speculum perfectionis*. Franciscan works. Jacopone da Todi: De lo 'nferno non temere/e del ciel spem non avere;/ e de nullo ben gaudere/e non doler d'aversitate.//La virtù non è perchene/ca'l perchne è for de téne,/sempre encognito te téne/a curar tua enfermitate."²²² We find in this portion that Weil uses a mnemonic hook (the da Todi quote) as a reminder for a later engagement of a entire reading program that focuses on the care of self that da Todi suggests.

Not only does this quote, and its attendant reading program, suggest the care of self common to ancient philosophical and medieval pastoral/religious practice, it also demonstrates the immediate efficacy of writing quotes from predecessors. As Marcus Aurelius quoted important parts of Epictetus, as they became appropriate to his specific situation, so Weil quotes a situationally meaningful text here, one that aids her in self-healing. Both in the pre-war notebook and the present one, we notice Weil's incessant self-deprecating tone. She often underlines her self-perceived deficiencies and what she

²²¹ Ibid., 205.

²²² Jacopone da Todi, *Laude*, edited by Franco Mancini CL 20-0698-7 (Bari: Guiseppe Laterza and Figli, 1974), Sect. XXXII, Stz. 36, lns. 63-70. As quoted by Weil in *FLN*, 205. Trans. "Do not fear hell and do not hope for heaven; do not enjoy anything too much and do not grieve at misfortune. Virtue is not why and wherefore, her reason is beyond you. Ask no more, but apply yourself to healing your infirmity."

may be able to do to correct them. Here we see her use pointedly therapeutic language with the words of Jacopone da Todi.

In keeping with Weil's mystical conversion experience, her view of the soul's sickness is directly related to its debt to God through sinfulness. Though this particular view is a development from the ancient view of soul sickness, she treats it with similar language having to do with sickness and health.

But the most difficult remission of debts consists in forgiving God for our sins. The sense of guilt is accompanied by a sort of rancour and hatred against the Good, against God, and it is the effect of this mechanism that makes crime harmful to the soul. ¶ Crimes unaccompanied by even a fleeting sense of guilt do not harm the soul. But they can only occur in certain states of the soul which are themselves moral maladies. ¶ Such crimes become harmful as soon as there is convalescence, because then the sense of guilt awakens and is repressed.²²³

Weil engages in similar Christianizing of Stoic themes as seen in chapter two by re-inscribing the notion of Stoic choice: "It is impossible to receive the good when one has not desired it. That is the meaning of the precept: confine your desires to the things that depend on yourself."²²⁴ Also, when speaking about Amor fati she states, "that is why the one and only liberation is love of the order of the world."²²⁵ In keeping with her Christian perspective, Weil's notion of the order of the world doesn't rest on fate as understood by the Stoics, but rather God's originating love.

She does, however, recognize that care of self does "depend on oneself" and involves significant self-directed work. She states, "The purpose of human life is to

²²³ Ibid., 140.

²²⁴ Ibid., 142.

²²⁵ Ibid., 144.

construct an architecture in the soul.”²²⁶ With this clear vision of the goal of human life, it is not surprising that much of her work here in her most personal text involves this important practice of soul-development.

Weil’s pedagogic use of contradiction in the New York notebook

Weil’s personal connection to her text and her use of ancient philosophical-therapeutic themes and practices are not the only important features in regard to her personal pedagogy. Weil’s treatment of contradiction throughout this text, both in her elaboration of its meaning and her use of it in meditative practice, is an important link to her philosophy of education as seen in chapter three. Here she moves beyond her vague notions of lever and the tools of human creation (boats, pulleys) as in the Pre-War Notebook, to explore the religious and transcendental significance of contradiction.

As a mark of continuity with her previous notebook, and also her work in *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, we will begin our investigation of Weil’s developing notion of contradiction with her treatment of it as a lever. She says, “There are not two justices in God, but only one. Self-contradictory. Contradiction is the lever of transcendence.”²²⁷ In order for contradiction to work on such a scale, however, the lever must be understood as Weil drew it on the front cover of the Pre-War Notebook—with the light weight on the human side and the heavy weight close to the fulcrum on the transcendent side. It is only with this understanding of the balance that contradiction can do its intended work; only when the fulcrum is entirely off-centered can the feeble human intellect attempt to lift the immense weight of transcendent reality. The notion of the lever speaks as much to the

²²⁶ Ibid., 208.

²²⁷ Ibid., 134.

disparity between human and divine as it does to the possibility inherent in humanity.

Contradiction, indeed.

In addition to contradiction, she also states that the body can be understood as a lever. The visual representation of the de-centered fulcrum remains important: “the body is a lever by which the soul acts upon the soul. Through discipline imposed on the body the wandering energy of the soul automatically exhausts itself... ¶ The soul needs to have been divided in two before one part of it can thus use the body against the other part.”²²⁸ Here, in keeping with her focus on the human goal indicated by the architecture of the soul, she pits the soul’s two parts (eternal/spiritual and carnal²²⁹) against one another.²³⁰ She also indicates her personal stake in this process through her self-directed statement: “may my body be an instrument of torture and death for all that is mediocre in my soul.”²³¹ Here Weil carries on the imagery of the bi-partite soul and desires her body to engage in the work of lever to allow the eternal part of the soul to achieve its greatest goal—that of connection to the divine. In this way, Weil’s dual use of lever imagery is apt, since this tendency toward the transcendent is the very goal of contradiction, focused by attention, as well.

²²⁸ Ibid., 230.

²²⁹ Ibid. Weil states: “The soul needs to have been divided in two before one part of it can thus use the body against the other part.”

²³⁰ Here one is reminded of the architecture of the soul made famous by Plato in *Phaedrus*. With desire and truth as foremost, the Great Speech tells the story of a battle paradigmatic of what would be later know as a spiritual battle between the eternal (divine) and base (human) parts of the soul. Foucault reminds us of this structure and its relation to an individual’s grasp of the truth (as concerns Weil here) in *The Use of Pleasure*. “Now, throughout this narrative that claims to reveal the true nature of the human and divine soul, the relation to truth plays a fundamental role.... The relation of the soul to truth is at the same time what founds Eros in its movement, its force, and its intensity, and what helps it to become detached from all physical enjoyment, enabling it to become true love.” Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1985), 88.

²³¹ *FLN*, 230.

She continues her self-dialogue by reflecting on this important battle for her soul.

One should sometimes do violence to one's thought, one should sometimes nail the body down and leave thought to exhaust itself. But the body must be trained to listen only to the higher part of the soul. How? Treat the lower part of the soul like a child which one leaves to cry until it is tired and stops. In the whole universe nothing pays any attention to it. Whereas God is attentive even to the silence which the eternal part of the soul addresses to Him. "Don't listen to yourself."²³²

This statement gives an interesting caveat to the practice of self-dialogue, since it is clear to Weil that not all voices are worth listening to. Instead, one must practice the waiting discipline of attention, distinct here from "paying attention," in that in this discipline what is worthy and good comes to the fore through the silence.

Attention is also important in determining the appropriate part of the soul for the body to listen to as it reflects God's speaking to one, or not. Weil says, "if [the body] does not obey, then the order did not come from the eternal part of the soul, or else it was given without sufficient attention."²³³ Here we see the importance of both attention and contradiction as pedagogic tools used in Weil's notebooks in the cause of the care of the soul, particularly this section on the relationship between the parts of her soul and her body.

Weil further links the understanding of contradiction and attention through her view of necessity. She states: "Necessity: ensemble of laws of variation which are determined by fixed and invariant ratios. Reality=contact with a necessity. (contradiction): necessity is not tangible. Harmony, mystery."²³⁴ As necessity is itself a contradiction, attention is employed in the assertion of this necessity. "Attention is what

²³² Ibid., 230-231.

²³³ Ibid., 230.

²³⁴ Ibid., 88.

creates *necessary* connections. (Those that do not depend upon attention are not necessary.)”²³⁵ As in our previous chapter, Weil is most interested in those contradictions which function as a lever of transcendence, probing those deep mysteries that are accessible only to the attention as necessary truths that seem incompatible. She states, “Contradiction is legitimate when the suppression of one term involves destroying the other or emptying it of substance. In other words, when it is inevitable. Necessity is the supreme criterion of every logic. It is only necessity that puts the mind in contact with truth. Why? Also a subject for meditation.”²³⁶ Through her helpful treatment of the meaning of contradiction here, we can appreciate it as more than a classroom tool; in this formulation, contradiction through attention is an important meditative method.

Weil treats this important pedagogic tool elsewhere in the notebook. In addition to lever imagery, she also uses that of a door, showing again the significance of contradiction to meditative understanding.

The notion of mystery is legitimate when the most logical and most rigorous use of the intelligence leads to an impasse, to a contradiction which is inescapable in this sense: that the suppression of one term makes the other term meaningless and that to pose one term necessarily involves posing the other. Then, like a lever, the notion of mystery carries thought beyond the impasse, to the other side of the unopenable door, beyond the domain of the intelligence and above it. But to arrive beyond the domain of the intelligence one must have travelled all through it, to the end, and by a path traced with unimpeachable rigour. Otherwise one is not beyond it but on this side of it.²³⁷

Though it is only through attention that we can approach the door or lever (after “unimpeachable rigor”), meditation on contradiction exercises the tool (opening the door,

²³⁵ Ibid., 90.

²³⁶ Ibid., 124.

²³⁷ Ibid., 131.

applying weight to the lever). While this is “beyond the domain of intelligence,” it is still within the realm of human capacity to engage in this meditative practice, and—more than that—it is central that we as humans *do*.

Continuing with the image of contradiction as door, she uses it as a means to the transcendent, the thoughts of God. She does so by reflecting on the relation between created things and God.

To refrain from conceiving those relations [between two or several created things] for ourselves is only a step on the way. The end is to conceive each of them, specifically, as a thought of God’s. ¶ And that is a miracle; because it is a contradiction to speak of God thinking a particular thought. A contradiction can only become fact by a miracle. [...] in the domain of the transcendent contradictories are possible. ¶ A particular thought of God’s. This is one of those contradictions which are not fallacies, but openings into the transcendent; they are like doors on which one must knock again and again, because in the end they will open.²³⁸

Indeed, through her constant repetition of these themes, Weil is exercising just the pedagogic practice that she holds up as a virtue for all who may read this after her. She also reinforces the Franciscan tendencies that she alluded to above.²³⁹

Towards the goal of humankind also engaging in this attentive pursuit of and discovery of fundamental contradiction within the transcendent, Weil suggests an “urgent, essential task” to develop a discipline whose focus is this transcendent, mystery-founded realm. She calls for “a logic of the absurd. To define so far as possible the criterion of truth and falsehood in the transcendent sphere, where contradiction is not out of place, the domain of mystery. In this domain greater rigour is required than mathematics. A new rigour, of which people nowadays have no idea.”²⁴⁰ Insofar as Weil

²³⁸ Ibid., 269.

²³⁹ See her reading list on page 89 above.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 182.

contemplates the profound mysteries that her determined attention calls to mind, she engages in the practice of this new discipline, this “absurd logic.” However, the practice in her notebooks remains just that—practice, not new theory.

Again, as this notebook was composed toward the end of her life, in the years following her dramatic mystical experience, it is not surprising that she discovers in Christ the catalyst that makes sense of the many mysterious contradictions that she discovers. More than this, the contraries that devotion to Christ brings to light function positively in the person—analogue to the function of the eternal part of the soul. She states,

When the whole soul is crying “I must have...!”, except for one point in it which replies “Why?” and “I consent to the contrary...”, at that moment one is bearing one’s cross. But Christ has said that we must do it every day. How is that possible? Must we put ourselves in a position to suffer to that extent every day? ¶ Perhaps. ¶ When there is intense and pure joy one is equally empty of good, because then all good resides in the object. ¶ There is as much sacrifice and renunciation at the bottom of joy as there is at the bottom of pain.²⁴¹

It is clear from Weil’s continual re-definition of contradiction, as well as its repeated use in her thought as a tool for access to the transcendent sphere that contradiction is important to her care-of-self both in thought and practice. Her connection between body and contradiction using the imagery of the lever is significant and shows us that her concept of contradiction, even in its strongest form (as mystery), is tied to a strong understanding of the use of the body (at the behest of the divine part of the soul). As such, contradiction does a significant amount of work for Weil—assisting her understanding of the soul in parts (230), linking her materialistic understanding to the transcendent realm (through the imagery of the door and the lever—131 and 134,

²⁴¹ Ibid., 234-5.

respectively) and providing a goal for attention (230). This pedagogic tool, conceived of earlier as a simple examination of the opposite in a correlative or paradoxical way (*LP*), is used in this later notebook as a tool for transcendence. This understanding of contradiction as a tool for transcendence is central for understanding Weil's appropriation of the ancient practice of care-of-self. This is because it is only through this strong understanding of contradiction as mystery that Weil can understand her soul's relation to the transcendent. In other words, only so she can understand its extreme distance from, but also its possible and potential efficacy in approaching, the transcendent. It is in this pursuit that the eternal part of the soul recruits the use of both body and contradiction as the appropriate levers, but also the discipline of attention that ensures the proper goal.

The London Notebook

Weil wrote her final notebook in London while suffering from the tuberculosis that would eventually contribute to her early death. The last section of the compilation we have been studying, *First and Last Notebooks*, it is also by far the shortest. It is closely related in time to her New York notebook, varying quite little in thematic contribution. For these reasons, our treatment of it here will also be, understandably, brief. Consistent with the examination undertaken thus far, this section will attempt to ascertain the ways that Weil uses this notebook as a type of therapy of soul—filling it with those words that are the most apt for dealing with her current struggles.

Upon leaving the United States, which she had desired from the moment she landed there, Weil obtained transport to London, England. Though not her beloved country, France, at least it was close enough to monitor how France was faring in the war, and—as she continuously hoped—close enough to the fighting to be sent on a dangerous mission. While this request was never granted to her satisfaction, she

occupied the last months of her life devoted to her writing. Pétrement says about her London writing (including her last notebook), “she wrote almost without any changes or erasures, as if swept along by a firm and continuous inspiration. Her handwriting is always slowly formed, regular, and pure. She expressed her ideas, which were often daring and paradoxical, with an ever-increasing tranquil assurance.”²⁴²

Though her writing may have been tranquil, the matter for Weil’s consideration here was anything but. Her purpose was to be closer to the war on the continent, and it is clear from parts of her text that one of her main attempts was to reconcile the person and model of Christ and her loyalty to France. She wrestles with the statement “Love your enemies,” which I will quote at length to show the acute struggle between the two possible attitudes that Weil discovers.

“Love your enemies,” etc., has nothing to do with pacifism and the problem of war. “Your enemies” can have two different meanings. It may mean those who do harm to your person and to what you personally hold dear. In so far as I have suffered in my personal life because of the Germans, in so far as things and people to whom I am personally attached have been destroyed or hurt by them, I have a special obligation to love them. Or “your enemies” may mean enemies of faith. If I am prepared to kill Germans in case of military necessity, it is not because I have suffered from their acts. It is not because they hate God and Christ. It is because they are enemies of every country in the world, including my own, and because, to my acute pain, to my extreme regret, it is impossible to prevent them from doing harm without killing a certain number of them.²⁴³

Though a significant amount of this brief notebook deals with those unique circumstances which now confront Weil (her residence in London and in the hospital), the remainder of this notebook renews reflection upon themes brought up in earlier parts of her oeuvre. As this notebook was composed near the end of her life, this repetition

²⁴² Pétrement, 493.

²⁴³ *FLN*, 340.

gains significance, indicating a particular phrase as a source of comfort or necessary provocation to accept the things that will be.

Weil's meditation on the first half of the Lord's Prayer—found near the end of the notebook—is one of these significant repetitions. The “Our Father,” as she called it, was Weil's first prayer, and one that she repeated as a meditative practice after learning it by heart in Greek. She states in a letter: “I have made a practice of saying [the “Our Father”] once each morning with absolute attention. If during recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have succeeded in going through it once with absolutely pure attention. Sometimes it comes about that I say it again out of sheer pleasure, but I only do that if I really feel the impulse.”²⁴⁴ Hence, when in some of her last written work, Weil again fleshes out the meaning of the first half of the Our Father, as it has come to have in her experience, it is a very important repetition. She treats every line in turn, explaining her personal application of it for her current situation.

“Hallowed by the name.” [sic.] By using the name of God we can orient our attention towards the true God, who is beyond our reach and is inconceivable by us. [...] “Thy kingdom come” May thy creation disappear absolutely, beginning with myself and everything to which I am attached in any way whatsoever. “Thy will be done” Having absolutely relinquished every kind of existence, I accept existence, of no matter what kind, solely through conformity to God's will. “On earth as it is in heaven” I accept the eternal decree of the divine Wisdom and its entire unfolding in the order of time.²⁴⁵

As in the New York notebook, Weil also repeats the now haunting Greek phrase, “τουτο δός έμοί κύριε.”²⁴⁶ Whereas in our previous examination of this command, we

²⁴⁴ *WG*, 71.

²⁴⁵ *FLN*, 360.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 353. Translation: “Grant me this, Lord.”

noted only that it was an instance of Weil's use of her notebooks for purposes that she wanted to incorporate directly into her life (not as external commands for future readers), here we note its context. She says immediately before: "Total humility means consent to death, which turns us into inert nothingness. The saints are those who have really consented to death while they were still alive. *τοῦτο δός ἐμοί κύριε.*"²⁴⁷ Here she states clearly the model that she desires to follow—the self-denying practice of the saints. Second, her plea to God here is met with quick fulfillment. Weil demonstrates the consent to death that she wishes to make a part of her life by her very circumstances: malnourishment in the face of already severe illness.

She underscores this consent by using some of her last words to speak of the religious associations of food—persisting to write and think about food, even as she denies ingesting it. It is highly significant that while her death was attributed to starvation by doctors and on her death certificate, she spoke eloquently of food, even as her final words. "From the alliance between matter and real feelings comes the significance of meals on solemn occasions, at festivals and family or friendly reunions, even between two friends and so on. And the significance of special dishes: Christmas turkey and marrons glacés—Candlemas cakes at Marseilles—Easter eggs.... The joy and the spiritual significance of the feast is situated *within* the special delicacy associated with the feast."²⁴⁸ Here again the spiritual meaning of the food is more significant than

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 364.

its physical use as a remedy for the sickness of her body; however, the physical is still central as means to the spiritual.²⁴⁹

All this is to say she gives her choice to refrain from eating added significance by showing recognition of its benefit, beauty and pleasure. Denying it in light of this does indeed show her renunciation, her consent to die, and the importance of action in philosophy. Her death is therefore an extreme example of her statement, “Philosophy is *exclusively* an affair of action and practice. That is why it is so difficult to write about it.”²⁵⁰ Weil’s *cura sui*, the pedagogic struggle of her life, consistently emphasized meaning attained through existence. In this statement before the final act of her death, she once again emphasizes the meaning possible through existence, especially in its most extreme degree. Though the physical seemed to be subsumed to the more important spiritual throughout her life, it is closer to the truth that she saw the physical (via the body and physical tools like contradiction and attention) as the means to the spiritual. As such, action is the greatest contributor to meaning.

The contradictory view of the body and food that Weil’s position here indicates further testifies to the deep and pervasive importance of contradiction in her thought. Analogous to her contradictory emphases on food (for spiritual or physical needs) is her contradictory stance toward baptism (its importance, yet also the importance for Weil to abstain from it). These stances that are difficult for us to reconcile are for her central in understanding the relationship between her bodily reality and the transcendent. Indeed her

²⁴⁹ Compare to the eucharistic emphasis specifically on wheat growers and vineyard workers in her prescriptive suggestions in *NYN* [cf. page 86 above]

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

body—as the crossroads for these pairs of contradictions serves as the lever for the transcendent.

Summary

In summary, the philosophical practice that we find in Simone Weil's first, and especially in her last notebooks recalls the practice of Marcus Aurelius in its personal and pedagogic sensibilities. Both her love of ancient Greek practice and her engagement with their thematic concerns and pedagogic style manifest themselves in important ways throughout these pages. Of course, while Weil admires and sometimes in her work imitates ancient spiritual exercises, her particular inflection of this philosophic practice is the main concern of this chapter.

Through our engagement of these three important notebooks, we have connected the three main parts of this thesis. Weil's personal life as philosophy (as discovered in the first chapter) found an important voice in these notebooks, though in very different capacities. In her pre-war notebook, Weil used the practice of writing to reinforce certain practices that she desired to be a larger part of her life. She demonstrated this by discovering, textually, those areas in her life which were most lacking, and then prescribing appropriate practices to counteract them. Her personal engagement remained therapeutic in the New York notebook inasmuch as it continued to focus on those areas in her experience that she could examine textually (the agricultural imagery), though it also provided her a way of making clear to herself those issues which were most important (like baptism). The London notebook is even more deeply therapeutic for Weil, making clear those reasons why she would choose to die while still alive.

Weil demonstrated her personal affection for the philosophy as a means of therapy of soul (as in the Stoic practice of Marcus Aurelius in the second chapter) in several ways throughout the notebooks. In addition to the personal therapeutic textuality noted in the previous paragraph, Weil also explicitly referenced several themes and practices common to the Stoics—the philosophers that we examined as paradigmatic for the therapy of soul that Weil admires and practices. Weil briefly indicates in the pre-war notebook Marcus and Epictetus as significant to her thought,²⁵¹ though her *engagement* with these thinkers is perhaps more important at this early stage, as seen in the personal practice above. In addition to this implicit use of Stoicism, her attitude toward the order of life—*amor fati*—mentioned by name in the New York notebook and implicit in the London notebook, is a direct link to the Stoic choice to make one's desires consistent with the order of the world.

Finally, we find throughout the notebooks a growing emphasis on the importance of contradiction. As we examined in the previous chapter, this theme is important to Weil's pedagogy, though it takes several different forms, and along with those forms, several different degrees of importance. As the pre-war notebook is contemporaneous with the beginning of Weil's teaching career, she begins thinking about its importance here, but in vague terms—surrounding symbols of tools like levers, boats and pulleys. The New York notebook, written several years later, shows a definite progression from her earlier vague notions and explicates both her maturing definition of contradiction and its personal pedagogic use. As her later two notebooks were written at the conclusion of her formal teaching experiences, the understanding of contradiction contained in these

²⁵¹ *FLN*, 19-20.

two notebooks is less focused on conveying information to pupils in the most effective way and instead trained on self-understanding and the therapy of the soul.

Concluding Assessment

Weil's interaction with the ancient philosophical tradition is deeply connected to her life practice, and is connected to various ancient exemplars. In our exploration here, we found that the theme of pedagogy, as exemplified through Weil's treatment of contradiction, attention and memory, are pervasive in her writing and are deeply connected to various ancient exemplars like Marcus Aurelius who demonstrate philosophy as a way of life.

By assessing Weil's own pedagogical reception through the formative teaching of Alain and then at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, we found the beginnings of her love for the ancient philosophy in the Western tradition. This love was evident not only through the texts that would be influential for Weil throughout her life, but also in her certain practice of philosophy that she would attempt to engage through her life and writing. Though Alain's teaching gave her an initial example of philosophy as a way of life, her own teaching practice (for her students in a limited way, and for herself much more strongly) was designed to follow the ancient practice at least as that practice has been portrayed by Pierre Hadot.

Marcus Aurelius' practice of the philosophy of right living, demonstrated in his *Meditations*, figures strongly in Weil's later work. His emphasis on contextual application of principles, on the active nature of philosophy, and the importance of writing for mnemonic purposes are also central components of Weil's *First and Last Notebooks*. The cross-over between these two thinkers centers on their understanding of pedagogy, that is, who it is for and how to go about it.

As we witnessed in chapter three, Weil is very concerned with pedagogy in its various different capacities. In documents gleaned from her own teaching (*Lectures on Philosophy*) and from essays that function as social suggestions (*Need for Roots* and “Reflections on the Use of School Studies”) we found ample evidence for Weil’s philosophy of education. Her emphasis remained consistently on the particularly situated individual (as a singular instance of eternal destiny) and the importance she placed on the eternal part of that individual’s soul, as developed through the proper use of attention. We noted that she used many tools to access this eternal part of the soul, analogy and myth, and most notably contradiction. These aspects of her pedagogy were important for students either in her classes, or in the factories that she frequented, as has been treated by various Weil scholars. However, these practices come into great relief when applied to herself, as we discovered in our investigation of her *First and Last Notebooks* in chapter four.

Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Weil’s *Notebooks* are superficially very similar—they were both written as personal notes and for the author’s own therapeutic benefit and so focused on pedagogical development. Weil’s notes to self about reading lists²⁵² as well as her repetition of striking self-commands (“Father grant me this...”) fit in well with Marcus Aurelius’ practice of personally therapeutic philosophy. Just as Marcus Aurelius was writing in keeping with the Stoic principles that he followed, so is Weil following closely the philosophical pedagogy that she develops throughout her writing. Because of this continuity, we found instances of Weil’s treatment of the “Stoic” exercise of contradiction (and its development in her thought from her treatment before

²⁵² See her list and its explication on page 89 above.

the war until just before her death), as well as evidence of the “Stoic” practice of attention, though in this context Weil employed these practices for her own pedagogical development.

Contemporary implications of Weil’s personal pedagogy

Both Weil’s explicit and allusive references to Marcus Aurelius throughout her oeuvre, and her treatment of pedagogy in various capacities show us that she engaged in important pedagogical work in her personally oriented *Notebooks*. But beyond connecting her once again to the ancient philosophical tradition which numerous sources have already told us she favoured, why is this important for contemporary philosophical life? It is the contention of this thesis that her connection to ancient philosophy (her demonstrated via her relationship to the work of Marcus Aurelius) is important because it shows us as contemporary readers a fruitful way of interacting with an ancient text—a way of interacting that is not limited to textual criticism and theoretical critique. Weil’s interaction with ancient texts, of which Marcus’ *Meditations* is but one example, is such that it informs her living and her way of philosophical inquiry. As Weil chooses this deep method of ancient textual interaction—dialogue with the spirit of ancient philosophy as a way of life, so too we as modern readers can follow her example of textual interaction.

The pedagogy that Weil demonstrates in her *Notebooks* is not new. We examined it first in Marcus, though his practice was also common within the ancient milieu of which he was a part. What is important about this old practice is its adaptability for various times and situations. Because this auto-philosophical therapy is by definition personally situated, Weil’s practice here is as personally oriented as it was for Marcus,

Aurelius and is a viable example for new readers in their own personal philosophical pedagogy. Joan Dargan in her book entitled *Thinking Poetically*, says about Weil's

Notebooks:

the objects themselves, composed of small and now crumbling pages of cheap newsprint, convey something of the writing's character: its impromptu and, in a dark context, expendable nature; the identity of its substance with current events; the attempt to articulate things of value in the face of moral impoverishment; the scholar's simplicity, her eagerness to learn. Unlike other of Weil's writings, these are conceived as a series, a continuous investigation; they are not pronouncements from on high, but a form of discipline.²⁵³

It is precisely this eagerness to learn and her discipline of writing in the mode of her ancient exemplars that makes Weil such a beneficial example for our practice of philosophical investigation and our treatment of ancient thinkers.

The most important implications of the present study are not Weil's connections to ancient philosophy, but rather the living component of her appropriation that only lives on in our continued practice of the personal pedagogy that she demonstrated. As she inspires contemporary readers to engage in the similarly personal and contextually centered philosophical practice that she first found in the ancient philosophical tradition, her pedagogy lives on.

²⁵³ Joan Dargan, *Thinking Poetically* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 67.

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